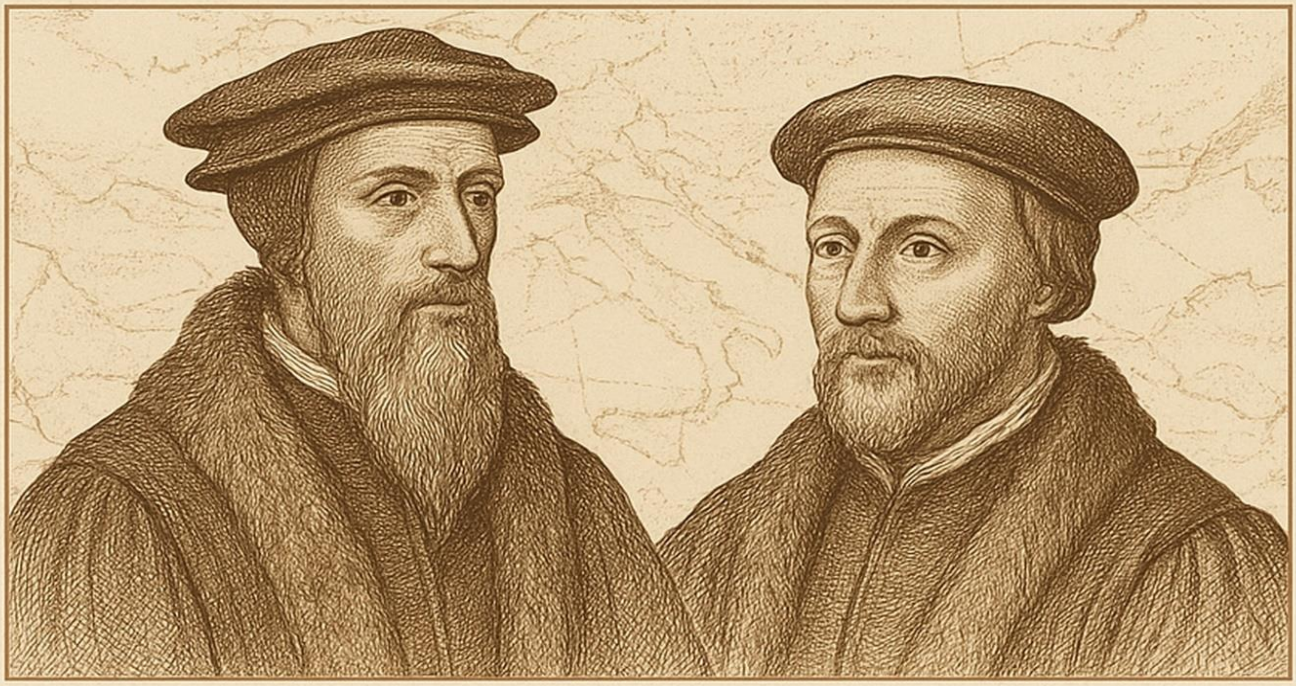
Travels with Calvin and Arminius

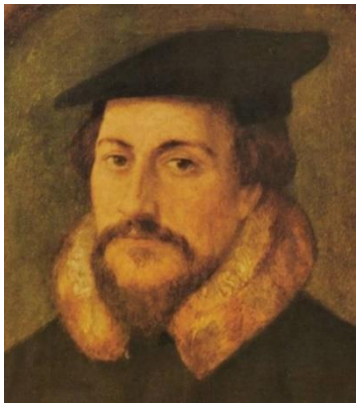
David Clarkson



An extended study guide with questions for personal and group reflection

Some preliminary remarks

John Calvin
1509-1564



Jacobus Arminius
1560-1609

About this guide

Few theological debates have shaped Protestant thought more than the one between Calvinism and Arminianism. Over the past eight years I have "travelled" with Calvin and Arminius and many of their followers through their books, blogs and lectures. Along the way, these voices have become familiar companions—almost like friends. Through this sustained engagement, I've come to appreciate both their distinctive contributions and their shared commitment to the gospel.

In keeping with the travel motif, I have organised the material for this guide in terms of a journey and an invitation to explore the territory with likeminded companions.

First the journey:
Chapter 1 offers a personal account of my journey into these theological waters.
Chapters 2–8 explore the central points of contention between Calvinism and Arminianism, examining where these traditions genuinely differ and why those differences matter.
Chapter 9 outlines my own conclusions reached as a result of these studies.
So, if your focus is on the theological issues, you can easily skip chapters 1 and 9. On the other hand, if you only need an outline of the key points of the debate, chapters 1 and 9 will probably be sufficient.

In addition, several appendices provide tools for further exploration, including collections of Scripture references used by both traditions and quotations from influential voices across the spectrum. I have deliberately quoted the biblical passages in full, not only to spare readers the inconvenience of constant cross-referencing but also to provide a sense of the biblical argument as a whole.

Now the invitation:
Each of chapters 2 to 8 concludes with three distinct sections, designed to encourage active engagement and thoughtful reflection:

The first is entitled "Now it's your turn". This section invites you to move beyond passive reading and engage directly with Scripture. Using the references in Appendix A, you will have the opportunity to assess if the texts advanced by each side can bear the weight of the theological interpretations placed upon them?

The second is entitled "What's the Point?". In a debate filled with arguments and counter-arguments, it is easy to lose sight of the central issues. This section cuts through the many claims and focuses attention on those areas where Calvinism and Arminianism genuinely differ.

Finally, we have "from doctrine to devotion" which it is hoped will form an inspirational endpiece. It's not an afterthought, nor is it meant to suggest that spirituality should replace theological study. Rather, it's a call to see theology as a means to a greater end: a deeper awareness of God and a richer love for Christ.

A note on format

In order to make the guide as easy to use as possible, I have used footnotes rather than endnotes, so additional material can be consulted without interrupting the flow. Also, I have not always been able to provide strict academic conventions for locating every reference and, in a few cases I have simply recorded the reference as "Source unknown". Where I have fallen short, I have retained the references because of their insight and value.

About the author

David Clarkson brings a unique perspective to this theological study, combining scientific training with six decades of pastoral ministry. With an honours degree in chemistry and a distinguished career in education culminating as headteacher of a large comprehensive school, he approaches Scripture with both analytical rigour and practical wisdom.

For more than sixty years, David has taught and preached God's Word in local churches and, more recently, at Tilsley Bible College in Scotland. He has co-authored books on Christian leadership and pastoral care.

Writing from a background of ministry experience, David offers the perspective of a lifelong student of Scripture who has wrestled with these questions in the context of pastoral responsibility. His aim is not to persuade readers toward a particular theological position, but to help both ordinary Christians and serious students understand what Calvinists and Arminians actually believe, where they genuinely differ, and why these differences matter for Christian living.

Throughout the study, David emphasises how rigorous theological study should lead to deeper worship and greater commitment to Christ.

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Let's get started

Chapter 1 My personal journey

1 Where it all began

About eight years ago, I was invited to speak to a group of young people about Calvinism and Arminianism. Time magazine had identified New Calvinism as one of the major trends influencing American society[1]. It was exciting to see this resurgence, yet at the same time, I was aware that the issue was becoming divisive in many churches.

I accepted the invitation, but I was aware that my knowledge of the subject was very superficial. Determined to gain a better understanding, I resolved to research the subject further and even considered writing something with the working title "a year with Calvin and Arminius". However, as often happens, other priorities intervened, and that year stretched to several more, with the result that I now find myself needing to commit my thoughts to writing, otherwise this project will remain forever unfinished.

What follows is a reflection on a lengthy journey marked by moments of confusion as I tried to get to grips with the range of positions. It was hard to disentangle every claim and counterclaim. Every author or speaker had strongly held views which seemed to differ only in minor detail from others, even from the same theological camp. It has been a rollercoaster of a journey, frustrating and fascinating, often at the same time.

The resurgence of Calvinism

In the latter half of the twentieth century, a renewed interest in Calvinism began to challenge much of western Christianity's "feel good theology" which focussed on a benevolent God who exists primarily to meet our needs and solve our problems. However, this left many people looking for something more substantial—a theology that could provide a solid foundation beyond mere emotional comfort.

Donald McCullough captured this longing when he wrote: "Visit a church on Sunday morning – almost any will do – and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within its precise doctrinal position …. but you will not likely find much awe or sense of mystery …. The consuming fire has been domesticated into a candle flame, adding perhaps, a bit of religious atmosphere, but no heat, no blinding light, no power for purification. When the true story gets told, whether in the partial light of historical perspective or in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end the twentieth century has been the trivializing of God"[2].

Calvinism seemed to provide the answer; a theology grounded in centuries of scholarship bolstered by the powerful voices of modern proponents like James Montgomery Boyce, RC Sproul, John Piper, John MacArthur, and Tim Keller, whose ministries have been extremely successful in bringing Calvinist thought to the Christian public and beyond[3].

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[1] Time, March 23, 2009

[2] McCullough, D.W. The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity (NavPress, 1995), p13.

[3] Mark Dever provides an excellent summary of the new Calvinism: https://www.9marks.org/article/whered-all-these-calvinists-come-from/

Arminianism, on the other hand, regarded itself as aligned with mainstream evangelical teaching, so saw no need to develop and promote a specifically Arminian theology, with the result that fewer resources are available for study, leading to some confusion about its exact nature.

A suspicion of systems

Early in my researches I came across two books – "Why I am not a Calvinist" and "Why I am not an Arminian". While I found both of these books very helpful, I couldn't help but wonder how good it would be if someone wrote a book entitled "why I am neither a Calvinist or an Arminian". I admit that for many years I have been suspicious of "systems". Every system, by definition, comes with presuppositions that act as interpretive lenses, often leading us to filter out biblical texts that challenge our framework. Embracing any particular "system" inevitably limits our understanding of the breadth of biblical revelation. It's just the nature of systems.

Calvinism and Arminianism are frequently presented as alternative approaches to understanding God's relationship with humanity, but they are not the only ways to approach scripture, nor is it necessary to subscribe to one or other position. For centuries, scholars have attempted to organise the Biblical material as aids to understanding, and for that we are immensely grateful, but it is crucial to remember that while the Scriptures are God breathed, theological systems are not.

John Piper offers some very useful advice on this subject[4]:

1 The Bible is the ultimate authority on all matters of faith and practice.

2 Being faithful to Scripture is more important than faithfulness to theological systems.

3 Right-thinking about what the Bible teaches, matters. Theology is important.

4 According to 1 Corinthians 2, understanding biblical teaching requires prayer and a reliance on the Holy Spirit, rather than human reasoning or speculation.

5 We only see truth partially and imperfectly. No Bible teacher has all the truth.

6 Deuteronomy reminds us that not everything has been revealed to us, so sometimes we need to acknowledge mystery.

2 First impressions A Bumpy Start

When I began this journey, I quickly encountered a number of roadblocks that threatened to delay my progress. Here are some of my early observations:

"Fake news" rules Ok Navigating the internet jungle

For serious travellers, accurate information is crucial and the internet seems like the ideal starting point. However, while it offers a wealth of information, it is also a breeding ground for disinformation. The prevalence of "fake news" makes it essential to verify every statement, which can be very difficult. I

[4] https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/assumptions-irresistible-grace-session-2

"I do not begin as a Calvinist and defend a system. I begin as a Bible-believing Christian who wants to put the Bible above all systems of thought". Piper, John. Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God (Christian Focus, 2013), p9

learned early on to avoid the more sensational and eccentric sites where exaggerated claims and hostile attacks on opposing views dominate, often delivered with acrimony and malice.

Definitions are hard to come by One size doesn't fit all

Another early hurdle was the lack of agreed definitions for both Calvinism and Arminianism. The landscape is complex, with multiple versions and interpretations – one writer even claiming there are up to nine different strands of Calvinism[5]. This diversity makes it difficult to have a rational discussion of the issues, for every statement will inevitably draw criticism from those who feel their particular brand of Calvinism or Arminianism has been misrepresented.

Words are slippery Words in theological Tug-of-War

Calvinists and Arminians both claim allegiance to a common set of doctrines, including divine sovereignty, foreknowledge and free will, although they understand them differently. We can accept there may be different views on deep theological concepts, but the real challenge arises when seemingly simple verses, such as John 3:16 or 2 Peter 3:9, become the subject of debate. Arminianism says these verses plainly teach that God loves everyone and wants everyone to be saved, but Calvinism interprets them through the lens of unconditional election, claiming that the words "world" or "all" or "whosoever" do not refer to all humanity but to a specific group of individuals known as the elect.

Arminians advocate for a straightforward reading of the Bible, claiming that its words should be understood in their normal, everyday meaning. They stress the importance of allowing the Bible to define its own terms and concepts, cautioning against imposing our presuppositions onto the text.

Caricatures are easy Exposing insults and straw men

A fourth problem to be aware of is the way people speak of those who disagree with them. Some writers or bloggers resort to personal abuse hurling insults like "idiot" or "heretic", while others construct and demolish "straw men" to score debating points. For example, an Arminian might assert: "I am not a Calvinist because I do not believe that God drags some people, kicking and screaming against their wills, into the kingdom, while excluding others who desperately want to be there". A Calvinist, on the other hand, might dismiss Arminianism as a man centred gospel because, in this view, salvation depends on people choosing Christ as Saviour, while God stands by, passive and powerless, waiting for their decision.

Both statements are caricatures. No Calvinist or Arminian would recognise their beliefs as described by their opponents. If we are to criticise the position of someone who holds a different view from our own, we must at least ensure we understand them correctly.

There's always the unexpected Brace yourself for surprises

We've all been moved by Isaac Watts hymns, such as "When I survey the wondrous cross", but I was very surprised to read this verse in one of his hymns:

What bliss will fill the ransomed souls
When they in glory dwell

[5] https://reformedforhisglory.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/types-of-calvinism-a-comprehensive-list/

To see the sinner as he rolls
In quenchless flames of hell[6]

I also stumbled upon something called evanescent grace which is the concept that God provides grace to draw individuals almost to the point of salvation and then withdraws it[7]. Calvin's intention was to explain why some non-believers can experience deep conviction of sin, be profoundly attracted to Christ, even calling out for mercy, yet ultimately fail to embrace Him. Passages such as Matt 7: 21- 23 and Heb 6: 4- 6 provide the backdrop for this idea.

Mystery is unavoidable. What about paradox and contradiction?

Mystery in relation to God is an inherent aspect of creaturehood (Romans 11:33). We can never know all there is to know about God, for He is infinitely greater than our highest thoughts of him, defying our categories and transcending our understanding.

Paradoxes are common in everyday life; for example, light displays the properties of both particles and waves. The Bible, too, contains paradoxes, placing statements of divine sovereignty and human responsibility side by side, without attempting to reconcile them. It recognises both as true.

When theological systems encounter logical difficulties, appeal is often made to mystery or paradox as an explanation. The incompatibilities are not the same for each system, for example the Arminian cannot fully explain why some choose Christ while others do not, whereas the Calvinist can't explain why God chooses some for salvation while passing others by[8]. Ironically, both sides tend to highlight the other's weakness while failing to acknowledge their own.

Pursuing logical consequences to the point of contradiction can be dangerous. It is essential to avoid automatically assuming the existence of a mystery without first considering the possibility that our system may be flawed and that the contradiction is precisely that: a contradiction.

3 Setting the scene

Now that I've indicated how this journey came about, there are several issues we need to clarify before we proceed.

Which Calvinism, which Arminianism?

We must first define what we mean by Calvinism and Arminianism. This is not as simple as it sounds because various shades of belief exist along a spectrum as illustrated in the diagram below. Rather than

[6] Quoted in https://www.azquotes.com/author/15364-Isaac_Watts/tag/soul

[7] Calvin, Institutes of Christian Religion, 3.24.8,

[8] People don't choose Calvinism or free - will theism because one side has clearly proven itself right, but because they "find one set of mysteries easier to live with than the other."
Fischer, Austin. Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition p82

viewing these as rigid, separate groups, it's better to imagine a continuum, where ideas blend gradually from one into the next, with significant theologians represented at nearly every point.

The Calvinism/Arminian spectrum

Hyper-Calvinism	Moderate Calvinism	4 Point Calvinism	Classical Arminianism	Pelagianism[9]

On one end of this spectrum, we find Hyper-Calvinism, which embraces a strong form of determinism that asserts God causes everything, including sin. At the opposite end is Pelagianism, which emphasizes human free will to the point of denying original sin and claims humans can seek God of their own volition.

It's important to understand that Calvinists strongly resent being described as Hyper-Calvinists, just as Arminians object to being labelled Pelagian or Semi-Pelagians. Unfortunately, debates between Calvinists and Arminians often get muddied when each side attacks the other by accusing them of Hyper-Calvinism or Pelagianism. Equating the other side with an extreme position they don't hold hinders meaningful dialogue and perpetuates unfair stereotypes. Since most Calvinists and Arminians reject the extreme positions on the spectrum, this guide will focus on moderate Calvinism and classical Arminianism. But even within these narrower categories, there is a range of opinion and disagreement.

Over time, theologians have attempted to find a middle ground between Calvinism and Arminianism, giving rise to various positions such as "Four point Calvinism" (sometimes called Amyraldism[10]) Molinism[11], Provisionism[12] and Reformed Arminianism[13]. No attempt has been made here to describe what each group believes. If you are interested, you can find further information at the links below.

What is TULIP?

You might have heard Calvinists say "I'm a "five-pointer" or "I believe in TULIP". What does that mean? Well, first, a little history:

John Calvin (1509 – 64), a prolific writer and pivotal figure in the Reformation, profoundly influenced Reformed theology, which by the end of the sixteenth century had become the national religion in countries such as Holland and Scotland. However, Jacob Arminius (1560 – 1609) and others objected to

[9] In 431 A.D. Pelagianism was condemned in Ephesus by the third ecumenical council of Christianity because it affirmed natural and moral human ability to do God's will apart from the special operation of divine grace. Semi-Pelagianism was condemned by the Second Council of Orange in A.D. 529 because it affirmed human ability to exercise a good will toward God apart from special assistance of divine grace; it places the initiative on the human side, but Scripture places it on the divine side. Arminians consider both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism heresies.
Olson, Roger E.. Arminian Theology (p. 81). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

[10] https://www.gotquestions.org/Amyraldism.html
[11] https://www.gotquestions.org/molinism.html
[12] https://www.gotquestions.org/Provisionism-Provisionist.html
[13] https://www.gotquestions.org/Reformed-Arminianism.html

five specific issues in Calvinist teaching which were discussed at the synod of Dort in 1618 and which produced a five-point rebuttal from the Calvinist position.

Since then, Calvinism has been identified with these "Five points" but Calvinism is much bigger than that, as seen in the vast body of literature covering every aspect of reformed teaching[14]. The five points are really a response to a specific theological dispute rather than a comprehensive summary of doctrine. Calvinism isn't limited to just five points, nor was it created by John Calvin[15].

According to John Piper, "The five points are still at the heart of biblical theology. Where we stand on these issues deeply affects our view of God, man, salvation, the atonement, regeneration, assurance, worship, and missions. Somewhere along the way (nobody knows for sure when or how), the five points came to be summarized in English under the acronym TULIP"[16] but was popularised by Loraine Boettner in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* first published in 1932.

What does TULIP stand for?

1 **Total Depravity (T):** Because of the Fall, everyone is born spiritually dead, making it impossible for them to choose God or contribute to their own salvation.

2 Unconditional Election (U): Before the world began, God chose certain individuals for salvation, based solely on His sovereign will and grace, without regard to any merit or foreseen faith on their part.

3 Limited Atonement (L): Although the sacrifice of Christ was sufficient for the salvation of all people, God sent His Son to save the elect only.

4 **Irresistible Grace:** The Holy Spirit brings the elect to saving faith in Christ. When God decides to save an individual, the actions of the Holy Spirit are so powerful and effective that they cannot be resisted.

5 Perseverance of the Saints (P): asserts that those who are truly saved will persevere in faith and holiness until the end of their lives. God's grace guarantees the eternal security of the believer.

Most Calvinists believe that these five elements are inextricably bound together such that removing one would cause the entire system to collapse.[17]

It is also true that many Calvinists consider the TULIP acronym to be an oversimplification or even misleading. So, theologians like R.C. Sproul prefer "Radical corruption" to "Total Depravity"; "Sovereign election" for "Unconditional election"; "Definite atonement" for "Limited atonement"; "Effectual grace" to "Irresistible grace" and "Preservation" rather than "Perseverance" of the saints.

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[14] The range of Calvinist teaching can be seen in the Westminster Confession at https://sheffieldpres.org.uk/Westminster_Standards.pdf

[15] Famously R.T. Kendall's *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* argued Calvin was not a Calvinist: Calvin and the Calvinists - The Gospel Coalition

[16] Piper, John. Five points, page 12. You can download Piper's book at https://www.desiringgod.org/books/five-points

[17] "The five points of Calvinism hold together as a unified biblical system. If you try to remove one, the others start to collapse under their own weight. These doctrines form a chain of truths that, when accepted together, provide a coherent vision of God's sovereign grace."

Piper, John. Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God (Christian Focus, 2013), p. 21

And finally …..

Don't forget the goal

It is easy to get caught up in the cut and thrust of theological debate, of arguments around the meaning of words and points of doctrine, but this misses the point entirely. The great weighty matters raised in the Calvinism/ Arminianism debate fundamentally pertain to the character and activity of God. Focusing on the finer points of theology not only diverts us from an authentic encounter with God, but, even worse, leads us to imagine that we have been doing God's business.

The ultimate goal is for us to catch a glimpse of God's majesty and transcendence, to hear His voice reminding us of spiritual and eternal realities. This is our task and, hopefully, our joy. My prayer is that we will always keep this goal before us as we engage with these studies.

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Chapter 2 The Sovereignty of God

2.1 God at the Centre

Who God Is – His Character

To truly grasp the concept of God's sovereignty, we must first understand who God is. The character of God is revealed through His divine attributes, each one essential to understanding the fullness of His nature. These attributes are not isolated or contradictory; they work in perfect harmony. God is loving, holy, gracious, transcendent, and ever-present, displaying the full perfection of His divine majesty. God is more than any one of these qualities at any given moment; He is all of them, completely and simultaneously.

What God Plans – His Purposes (Decrees)

His purposes, or decrees, stem from this understanding of God's character. Before the foundation of the universe, God formulated His plan for all of creation[18] . This divine blueprint included the decision to allow sin into the world and the provision of a Saviour to rescue His people from its devastating consequences. The ultimate goal of all of the decrees is for God to be glorified in everything.

Underlying the decrees are several key assumptions. First, God has complete freedom to create and govern any kind of world He chooses. Although He is not the cause of sin, He permits it and sovereignly orchestrates its consequences to achieve His purposes. Second, every action that stems from God's holy and wise counsel is inherently just and good. Third, His decrees in no way diminish human responsibility or moral accountability.

How God Works – His sovereignty and providence

God's sovereignty is the expression of His complete authority and control over every event in the universe. His providence refers to His ongoing involvement with creation, ranging from the tiniest particles to the largest galaxies[19]. God's rule is supreme, and His will is the ultimate cause of all that occurs.

Sovereign in nature

God creates and sustains the universe. He actively preserves all things, maintaining their properties and powers, while retaining the right to intervene miraculously whenever necessary to accomplish His purposes.

Sovereign in history

He directs the course of historical events to fulfil His plans, in the lives of individuals and nations. The fulfilment of prophecy is a powerful testament to His sovereign control over the course of history.

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[18] "God's decrees are eternal acts of his will, by which, from his most wise and free purpose, he has unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass." Turretin, Francis. Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume 1, Topic 5, Question 6.

[19] "Toplady says concerning the sparrow "an all wise Providence has before appointed what bough it shall build its nest on, what grains it shall pick up and when it will die". He also says "God guides the movements of the specks of dust shimmering in the Sunbeam". Quoted and sourced by Jack Cottrell in "The grace of God, the will of man", Zonderman, p99.

"God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases." Pink, A.W. The attributes of God, ch 6.

Sovereign in grace

In the realm of grace, God's sovereignty is demonstrated in His eternal choice of those who will be saved. He meticulously oversees the process of drawing these chosen individuals to Christ and preserving them for eternal life.

While there is agreement on the preceding teachings, different emphases arise. Calvinists emphasise God's absolute sovereignty, highlighting His power and authority. On the other hand, Arminians highlight God's love and His willingness to engage with His creatures in order to accomplish His will. Despite these differences, both perspectives affirm the overarching truth of God's sovereign rule over all things. The various positions are illustrated in the diagram below:

The Calvinism/Arminian Spectrum

Hyper Calvinism	Moderate Calvinism	4 Point Calvinism	Classical Arminianism	Semi - Pelagianism
God is absolutely sovereign over every detail			God limits His sovereignty to allow free choice	

2.2 Absolute sovereignty (Calvinism)[20]

The concept of absolute sovereignty in Calvinism means that God has complete authority and control over all aspects of the universe. Nothing is too small or insignificant; everything occurs according to His will and purpose. This concept is commonly known as "meticulous providence."

Two ideas lie at the heart of Calvinism:

Determinism is the belief that God determines everything that happens.

Monergism is the belief that God alone provides everything needed for salvation. Humans cannot earn or influence their salvation—it is solely God's work.

2.3 Absolute sovereignty explored.

Calvinists hold to the idea of absolute sovereignty in order to emphasise God's greatness. Every event is part of His plan, so that all glory and praise belong to Him. This conviction also gives believers a sense of gratitude and assurance, knowing that their salvation and circumstances are entirely in God's hands.

Challenges and criticisms

The doctrine of absolute sovereignty is not without its challenges, some points of contention are listed below:

1. **Free will and responsibility**. If God predetermines everything, do humans truly have free will and can individuals be held accountable for their actions if they lack real choice in their decisions?
2. **Fairness and justice**. How can God be fair and just if he predestines only certain people for salvation and rejects all others?

[20] "The one rock upon which Calvinism builds is that of the absolute and unlimited sovereignty of the eternal and self-existent Jehovah". Peck, Andy. Pastoral Care Essentials. Cwr. Kindle Edition. Location 171

3. **Suffering and evil**. If God controls everything, is He responsible for all the suffering and evil in the world and, if so, how can He be loving and forgiving at the same time[21]?
4. **Evangelism and prayer**. Acceptance of predestination has led some to believe that sharing their faith or praying for others is unnecessary because God has already made all the decisions. This seems to contradict scripture's many encouragements to do both.

Calvinists firmly reject these arguments contending that (a) God is never unjust nor is He the source of evil, and (b) humans are both accountable and responsible for evangelism and prayer. They offer arguments such as the idea of permission which holds that God has ultimate control, and may allow events to occur without directly causing them. Moderate Calvinists also place a high value on prayer and evangelism

In more challenging cases, Calvinists invoke the concept of mystery, claiming that certain truths are beyond human comprehension, so we must simply trust God. While some aspects of divine sovereignty may appear illogical or contradictory to our finite minds, scripture clearly teaches them, so we are required to accept both. God has chosen to reveal only what is necessary for us and the rest we must leave to Him.

2.4 Limited Sovereignty (Arminianism)[22]

Arminians, too, believe that God has infinite power and is in total control of everything that happens. However, they define sovereignty as "having the legitimate right to rule rather than having absolute control over every detail of our existence". Arminianism asserts that God chose to limit His sovereignty to give His creatures some degree of autonomy. In this sense limited sovereignty is better described as the self-limitation of God.

This self-limitation does not imply any reduction in God's sovereign power or that He was forced to restrict His activities. Instead, it underscores the intentional and voluntary nature of this limitation. God is free to exercise His sovereignty in any way He sees fit and is under no obligation to act in any particular way. It should be noted that any limitation of sovereignty applies only to God's actions, not His essential nature.

The Arminian view of sovereignty does not require that God micro-manages every event. He can control the world without causing everything that happens. God can take the free actions of men and turn them to His glory. He does not need to "control" everything to be in control[23].

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[21] Mark Talbot takes this objection head on e.g. "God brings about all things in accordance with his will. It isn't just that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those that love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects… This includes …. the Nazi's brutality at Auschwitz as well as terrible killings … and even the sexual abuse of a young child."

Talbot, Mark. Suffering and the Sovereignty of God, edited by Piper and Taylor, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2006) 41-42.

[22] "God's sovereignty means that he can do whatever he wants to do. If what he wants to do is create a universe in which some events are the results of free will choices, then this is what he sovereignly does. The fact that he chooses not to control everything directly doesn't mean he has less control, but rather that he has chosen a specific way to exercise his control."

Jack Cottrell, "What the Bible Says About God the Ruler" (1984), p. 376

[23] "Someone will say that God has been limited (by giving man free will). If the will is free, is not God confronted with that which he cannot control? The answer is no; he is confronted with that which he will not control. There is a tremendous difference between "cannot" and "will not." … Man does not limit God; God limits himself".

Cottrell, Jack. Cincinnati Bible Seminary, Volume IX--Number 3

Models of Self-Limiting Sovereignty

The life of Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Bible are examples of God's self-limiting sovereignty. When Jesus took on human form, He willingly "emptied Himself" of certain divine rights. Though He was fully God and totally in control of every situation, He did not dictate how people should respond to His teachings; rather, he called on His hearers to decide for themselves whether or not His message was from God.

Similarly, the inspiration of Scripture illustrates how God works with human authors, allowing them to bring their unique perspectives to their writings while ensuring that the final product perfectly expresses His intended message.

2.5 Limited sovereignty explored

Arminian theology contends that God's desire for authentic, voluntary relationships, based on love rather than coercion, is more consistent with the biblical portrayal of His character. Limited sovereignty emphasises that human freedom does not diminish divine sovereignty but rather enhances it, because God is able to accomplish His purposes while allowing free will choices. It also clarifies that sin entered the world through the misuse of free will, not as a result of the divine decree.

Limited sovereignty rejects the concept of meticulous providence, claiming that God remains sovereign even when He seems to "change His mind" in response to human decisions as seen in such passages as Exodus 32:9-14, 2 Kings 20:1-6 and Jonah 3:10.

Counterarguments and responses

Calvinists reject the concept of limited sovereignty, insisting it is a contradiction in terms[24]. God is either fully sovereign or He is not sovereign at all. They argue that God cannot guarantee the outcome of events if humans possess free will. In response, Arminians emphasise that an omniscient God can integrate human choices into His decrees, thereby achieving His goals[25]. Another Calvinist critique is that if salvation hinges on human choice, it could lead to boasting and a works-based gospel. Arminians counter this by stating that salvation is based on faith, not works, which eliminates any grounds for boasting. Lastly, some Calvinists caution that an overemphasis on God's universal love could lead to universalism. Arminians, however, maintain that since salvation is conditional on faith, not everyone will be saved.

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[24] "Nonomnipotent omnipotence is a self - contradiction." In other words, "God cannot use his sovereignty to make himself unsovereign." The idea is that God cannot help but be in complete control, cannot check his power, and "God is sovereign" means "God is in complete control." Piper, John. The Pleasures of God, pp 58, 105.

[25] "Who says God can't be sovereign over his sovereignty? Not God. God most certainly can and does check his sovereignty for the sake of his creation. And even more so, the truth of the great kenotic hymn is that Jesus does not cease to be like God in this act of voluntary self-limitation. Rather, it is in this act of voluntary, gracious self-giving and self-limitation that Jesus most reveals what God is like, for this is what God has been doing from the beginning.
Fischer, Austin. Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition, pp68,69.

"It is not accurate to say that belief in significant human choices denies God's sovereignty. A king with full power over his armies may be called sovereign over his country. But when he grants his general the authority to make strategic battle choices, the king hasn't relinquished power; he has delegated it".
Alcorn, Randy. hand in Hand (p. 141). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Now it's your turn

You have been provided with a great amount of information in this chapter which I hope you have found interesting, but the real point is "how does it fit with Scripture"? The Bible is our ultimate source of truth, not human reasoning nor what may appear acceptable to human thought categories.

If you are like me, you will want to skip the remainder of this chapter. For many years I convinced myself that that the theological dimension was the most important aspect, so I would rush on to the next chapter and leave the "spiritual" bit aside. This was a mistake and I think it was to my detriment.

What I am asking at this point is that you take time to compare the range of ideas presented so far in this chapter and compare them with the corresponding scripture passages listed in Appendix A.

The texts in Appendix A under sections 2.1 – 2.3 clearly affirm God's sovereignty, but do they go further and support the concept of meticulous providence, i.e. that God's sovereign will determines every action and decision in our lives?

Now compare these texts with those in sections 2.4 – 2.5. How should we understand the differences?

Taking the two sets of evidence together, can we draw any conclusions about Calvinism or Arminianism?

What's the point?

Calvinists and Arminians agree on several important points emerging from this discussion:

1. God's sovereignty is paramount, and His glory is the ultimate goal of all His actions.
2. Humans possess "creaturely" free will, which allows for genuine decision-making within the bounds of God's sovereignty. Humans are not autonomous free agents and cannot frustrate God's purposes, but they are still moral beings responsible for their choices.
3. The sovereignty of God does not remove the necessity of prayer and evangelism. These are the ordained means through which God brings the elect to salvation.
4. God is not the author of evil, nor is there ever a moment when he is not in control of everything that happens.

While Calvinists and Arminians agree on all of the above, they understand them slightly differently or to different degrees. The key issue relates to the question of meticulous providence: Does God determine and control every decision and action of His creatures, or does He allow for human free will, choosing instead to draw people to Himself through love and persuasion?

From doctrine to devotion

The concept of divine sovereignty helps us understand our place in the universe and our relationship with God. Whether one believes in meticulous providence or self-limiting sovereignty, this doctrine invites us to acknowledge the infinite wisdom, power, and goodness of the great Creator who rules over all.

At its core, divine sovereignty serves as a spiritual and intellectual anchor in a world that often seems random and chaotic. It reframes our perspective on history, viewing it as the unfolding of a purposeful plan rather than a series of disconnected, accidental events.

This is not a doctrine to be restricted to the study. It has practical implications for the way we live and think. It asks us to align our priorities with His purposes, to trust Him even when His ways are beyond our understanding. It shows us a dimension of prayer where we are actively engaged with God who has decreed that our petitions will play a decisive role in His unfolding plan. God's sovereignty compels us to worship Him, not as a distant deity, ruling with cold determinism, but as a present and loving Father to whom we can bring our prayers, fears, and hopes. In this warm relationship we come to recognise that suffering is not meaningless but part of a larger plan.

The doctrine of divine sovereignty offers profound hope and assurance, because it includes the assurance that no experience is truly random; no struggle is entirely without purpose and that no force in the whole universe can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The goal of these studies is not to comprehend every aspect of divine providence, but to surrender to a God whose wisdom far exceeds our understanding, whose love never fails, and whose sovereign plan ultimately works for the good of those who love Him.

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Chapter 3 The dark side of sovereignty

This chapter investigates the complex relationship between human free will and divine determinism, and how these concepts help to explain the existence of disasters and evil in the world.

3.1 Do humans have free will?

The debate over free will is framed by two opposing perspectives: determinism and libertarianism. Determinism holds that every event or action is the result of previous events or conditions, leaving only one possible outcome for any given decision[26]. Libertarianism, on the other hand, asserts that humans have genuine freedom to choose between various courses of action[27] and may be influenced but not bound by prior constraints.

These terms are not specifically religious. Determinism is a fundamental concept in science, philosophy and psychology. The basic premise is that in any situation, prior causes make it such that only one course of action is possible. Our concerns will focus on theistic determinism which holds that God is the prior cause of everything that happens. Libertarianism is the idea that we have the freedom to make our own choices. When we use the term "free will", we normally mean having the ability to choose between two or more options. This position maintains that in any choice, we could always have chosen differently or not at all.

Within the larger debate, a spectrum of beliefs emerges:

Hard determinism	Soft determinism		Soft libertarianism	Hard libertarianism
Hyper Calvinism	Moderate Calvinism	4 Point Calvinism	Classical Arminianism	Semi - Pelagianism
No free will	Compatibilistic freedom		Free to choose otherwise	

Hard Determinism maintains that free will is an illusion. Proponents contend that the concept of human freedom is fundamentally flawed because all actions are predetermined.
Soft Determinism (Compatibilism) argues that free will and determinism can coexist, allowing for some degree of human freedom within a predetermined framework.
Soft Libertarianism acknowledges the influence of external factors while maintaining that the final decision rests with the individual.
Hard Libertarianism asserts that individuals always have the option to choose otherwise, regardless of prior conditions.

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[26] "Nothing in this world happens by chance. God is in back of everything. He decides and causes all things to happen that do happen. He is not sitting on the sidelines wondering and perhaps fearing what is going to happen next. No, he has foreordained everything "after the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11): the moving of a finger, the beating of a heart, the laughter of a girl, the mistake of a typist – even sin." Palmer, Edwin. The Five Points of Calvinism. Baker Books, 2010, p30.

[27] "Libertarian freedom is the freedom to choose between alternatives, and it requires that our choices are not determined by anything outside of ourselves, including our own desires and character. It is the ability to choose otherwise, given the exact same circumstances and conditions."
Walls, J and Dongell, J. "Why I Am Not a Calvinist" (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), Ch 3.

Mainstream views like moderate Calvinism and classical Arminianism generally reject the extremes of hard determinism and hard libertarianism in favour of a more balanced perspective. We shall follow this lead and, for the most part, will focus on "moderate Calvinism" and "classical Arminianism" although there is still a range of opinion within each of these categories.

3.2 Understanding soft determinism (also known as compatibilism)

Compatibilism is an attempt to hold together the biblical teaching of God's absolute sovereignty and human responsibility. The case of Joseph's brothers (Genesis 50:20) and the crucifixion of Christ (Acts 2:23) demonstrate the dual reality that humans act freely and culpably, but their choices unfold precisely as God determined. Compatibilism seeks to uphold the glory of God, by ensuring that He remains the first cause of all things while preserving the reality of human decision-making within His sovereign plan.

Calvinists acknowledge the existence of free will in everyday decisions but not in moral or spiritual matters, arguing that humans are enslaved to sin and thus not truly free. According to this view, an act is considered free if it is not compelled by any external force. Calvinists attempt to reconcile divine sovereignty and human freedom by redefining free will as the ability to make choices based on one's strongest desire. In order to achieve His purposes, God works in our hearts to align our desires with His. Thus, our choices are free because we choose what we want most, and God's sovereignty is maintained because He determines what we wanted most[28].

Exploring the implications

Despite its attempts at reconciliation, compatibilism faces significant challenges. Critics argue that it is logically contradictory to claim that humans have free will while also claiming that God directs their actions. They see compatibilism as simply repackaging determinism in a more acceptable form.

Compatibility comes at a cost, requiring the redefinition of key concepts such as "permission" and "secondary causes" in order to overcome some of the challenges of hard determinism. However, Arminians claim that its fundamental premise remains unchanged: at the point of decision, only one option exists, and that is the one determined by God. Soft determinism is still determinism.

3.3 What is soft libertarianism? (The Arminian perspective)

Soft libertarianism holds that humans possess the capacity to make free choices without being compelled by external forces. While factors such as nature or upbringing may influence these decisions, they do not determine them; the final decision rests with the individual, who retains the ability to choose a different path.

The concept does not imply that humans have complete autonomy to do whatever they want. Freedom, according to soft libertarianism, is limited not only by God's sovereignty but also by the inherent constraints of human finiteness and sinfulness. It also does not imply that the human will is morally neutral, so that we have equal power to select any one of the available options. Nor does it imply that God

[28] Compatibilism is the view that "God so governs the inward feelings, external environment, habits, desires, motives, etc., of men so that they freely do what He purposes". Boettner, Loraine. The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination, pp. 214-215

simply observes human decisions. He is actively involved, sometimes guiding individuals toward righteousness, warning them against folly, or arranging their circumstances to align with His larger plan. But in the end, the individual decides how they will respond to such impulses.

Supporting claims

Proponents claim that free will was the accepted position of the early church, indicating how those closest to Christ and the apostles understood the issue[29]. Only with Augustine (around 400AD) was that called into question. Soft libertarianism also gives proper weight to the invitations and warnings found in the Bible; when God commands us to "come" or "choose," the implication is that we are capable of doing so. Additionally, soft libertarianism offers the best explanation for the origin of sin and lays the foundation for human accountability. By giving us the freedom to choose, God affirms our true humanity and our ability to have authentic relationships with Him[30].

Counter arguments

Despite these arguments, critics of soft libertarianism raise several concerns. They argue that human nature is so deeply flawed by the Fall that humans are incapable of making truly free choices. They also believe that any form of libertarianism undermines divine sovereignty, claiming that if humans have free will, God can never be completely sure His purposes will be achieved.

We now turn to our second issue:

3.4 If God is sovereign where did evil come from?

For centuries, Christians have struggled to answer this question: how can evil exist in a world created and ruled by a God who is both all-powerful and all-good? This raises further questions: If God controls everything that happens, does this include evil[31]? Did God cause Adam to sin, or was Adam's transgression beyond His control? If Adam alone was responsible, where did his desire to sin originate?

The Arminian perspective

Arminians approach this dilemma by emphatically denying that God is the cause of evil[32]. They believe that God endowed humanity with free will, and that sin entered the world through its misuse. To them, the

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[29] A helpful list of quotations is found in Steve Gregg's "Sovereignty of God and man's salvation, page 35, found at: https://www.matthew713.com/sites/default/files/documents/crombie_sovereignty.pdf

[30] "God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata — of creatures that worked like machines — would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for his higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to him and to each other… And for that they must be free.
C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 52-53

[31] "God, from all eternity, did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, neither is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established..." Westminster Confession of Faith, III: 1

[32] "Calvinism is hard-pressed to account for sin and evil in a way that is morally plausible. For if God determines everything that happens, then it is hard to see why there is so much sin and evil in the world and why God is not responsible for it."
Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, Why I Am Not a Calvinist (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 133.

existence of free will does not diminish divine sovereignty. Rather, they see God's omniscience as the key: He knows the outcome of every human decision and integrates these into the fulfilment of His plans[33].

The Calvinist response

Calvinists, on the other hand, grapple with the same issues but reach different conclusions. They believe that God's sovereignty entails having control over all events in history, including the existence of sin and evil. For some, this leads to the conclusion that God is somehow responsible for sin[34]. However, most Calvinists believe this is a step too far and seek to distinguish between God causing sin and God permitting it. They argue that God simply permits sin to occur but, this permission is not passive; it is "efficacious," meaning that it allows only one possible outcome—the one God has decreed.

Calvinists find value in the concept of "secondary agents" through whom God carries out His purposes. While these agents are responsible for their actions, their actions ultimately serve God's larger plan. Calvinists also distinguish between what God ordains and what He delights in, suggesting that God permits certain events with reluctance but ultimately works them for the good of His elect.

Arminians find this reasoning unacceptable, claiming it raises serious questions about God's character and the nature of human free will. They contend that redefining free will to exclude the ability to make genuine choices undermines the fundamental concept of moral responsibility. The concept of "efficacious permission" seems to them a contradiction in terms, and they find it difficult to see how God can commission agents to act and yet not be responsible for their deeds.

With this in mind we can extend our diagram:

Hyper Calvinism	Moderate Calvinism	4 Point Calvinism	Classical Arminianism	Semi - Pelagianism
No free will	Compatibilistic freedom		Free to choose otherwise	
God decreed the Fall	Efficacious permission		God permitted the Fall	Fall partial

3.5 Why did God allow sin to come into the world?

Both Arminians and Calvinists agree that God allowed sin to enter the world with full knowledge of its consequences and both appeal to a greater good argument by way of explanation.

[33] God isn't the author of evil, but he is the author of a story that includes evil. In his sovereignty, he intended from the beginning to permit evil, then to turn evil on its head and use it for a redemptive good.
Alcorn, Randy. hand in Hand (pp. 54-55). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

[34] "God is able without blameworthy 'tempting' to see to it that a person does what God ordains for him to do even if it involves evil." Piper, John. Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 24

"God permits what he hates to achieve what he loves".
Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, When God Weeps (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 84

The Arminian perspective[35]

Arminians contend that God's greater purpose was to foster genuine, reciprocal relationships with humans. He granted free will knowing that love cannot be forced. Despite foreseeing the possibility of disobedience and the resulting suffering, God deemed that the benefits of genuine love and trust outweighed the risk. The joy and worship that result from love freely given, bring God profound joy, reflected in a small way by a parent cherishing a child's spontaneous expressions of love.

The Calvinist perspective[36].

In contrast, Calvinists believe that God's greater purpose was to manifest His glory through the revelation of all His attributes. His love and grace are most evident in the redemption of sinful humanity, while His justice and wrath are fully revealed in the punishment of sinners. Calvinists claim that God loves all His creatures and wants them to be saved, but what he wants more is to display the fullness of his glory, so if His wrath and justice are to be fully revealed, there must be sinners to punish.

However, this perspective raises serious problems, notably that a) God was required to create a universe with sin and sinners, and b) He ordained the eternal damnation of the non-elect so that He would have sinners to punish. Many Calvinists find this a very difficult concept and Arminians absolutely reject it, claiming that human free will choices provide a more compelling explanation for the presence of sin in the world.

3.6 What kind of God is this?

The ongoing debate between Calvinists and Arminians centres on their differing views of God's nature and His interactions with humanity. Both sides appeal to the same Scriptures which describe God as almighty and powerful, yet, at the same time is loving and compassionate. However, they interpret these same scriptures through different lenses.

The Calvinist perspective

Calvinists emphasise God's power and sovereignty, meticulously orchestrating every aspect of His creation. They argue that if God was not in control of everything that happens, He would cease to be God. The emphasis on His transcendence and power inspires confidence, love and worship, knowing that this is the God who is "for us".

The Arminian perspective

Arminians, on the other hand, place a higher value on a personal relationship with God. They see Him as deeply engaged with humanity, displaying vulnerability and accessibility. God is portrayed as a loving

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[35] "Sin is not in this world because it was God's desire. It is here because God wanted us to make our own choice. God wanted us to love Him and love cannot be coerced. God gave mankind the free will to choose Him or reject Him. God receives the greatest glory when mankind chooses to love Him of their own free will".

Raymond, Bob. Is God Calvinist or Arminian? Kindle Edition. Loc 391.

[36] "So when I say that everything that exists — including evil — is ordained by an infinitely holy and all-wise God to make the glory of Christ shine more brightly, I mean that, one way or the other, God sees to it that all things serve to glorify his Son… By ordain I mean God either caused something directly or permitted it for wise purposes."

Piper, John. Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 54

parent who nurtures and guides His children, sensitive to human actions and emotions while remaining steadfast in faithfulness.

Now it's your turn
This is the point where we ask you to spend some time reading and reflecting on the Scripture references in Appendix A. Based on your study, which position—Calvinist, Arminian, or another—do you believe best aligns with the teaching of Scripture, and why?"

Don't be tempted to skip this section.

What's the point?
Determinism and libertarianism:

- It's not about whether one side believes all decisions are determined and the other that all decisions are free. Both sides agree that some decisions are determined while others are free.
- Both agree that God is sovereign and incorporates "free choices" into His purposes.
- Both believe humans make real choices with real consequences.

The main point of contention is how each side understands what constitutes "genuine freedom". Calvinists believe that a choice is free as long as the person acts according to their desires, even if those desires are determined by prior causes. Arminians believe that a choice is free only if the person has genuine options —the ability to choose otherwise in a given situation.

Do the Scripture passages point us toward one position or another?

Group discussion questions
How do we reconcile the belief that God is sovereign over all events with the idea that humans make genuinely free decisions? Can both be true, and if so, how?

The problem of evil

- Both Calvinists and Arminians agree that God permits evil to exist rather than directly causing it.
- Both believe that God is sovereign over all things, including evil.
- Both hold that God can transform every act of evil into something good.
- Both maintain that humans are morally responsible for their actions and the presence of evil in the world

The key issue relates to why God allowed sin to come into His "good" creation. If it was God's will that sin should enter this world in order to glorify His name, what does this say about His character? If, on the other hand, sin came into the world through our first parents, where did their desire to sin originate, and why did God not prevent them from eating the fruit?
What light do the Scriptures shed on this issue?

How do we balance these two biblical truths: that God is completely sovereign AND that He is not the author of evil?

From doctrine to devotion

As we grapple with the mysteries of free will and the presence of evil, we face questions that defy simple answers. We should not be unduly surprised at this for, by definition, the ways of a truly sovereign God will always surpass our comprehension. What appears as the "dark side" of sovereignty is only dark to us but never dark or troubling to God.

God’s rule over the universe doesn’t sideline human freedom. God allows genuine choice, even when this leads to evil and suffering. His sovereignty means He is working, often in ways we don’t see, through human choices and a broken world, transforming even the most difficult circumstances toward His ultimate plan of redemption. Though He permits evil for a time, He never allows it to have the final word.

While the origin of evil remains a mystery, we can be sure its final defeat is certain. The book of Job offers a model for responding to these mysteries—not through easy answers, but of a man standing firm in the storm, encountering God Himself. Job found something better than explanations – he found God Himself. His journey teaches us that authentic faith isn't built in maintaining a comfortable distance from hard questions, but in wrestling with them before the face of God.

Our response to evil, therefore, must not remain theoretical. God's sovereignty doesn't call us to passive acceptance but to passionate engagement. We are summoned not merely to ponder evil's existence but to oppose it, not simply to explain suffering but to alleviate it. We are called to prayer, worship, community, and action, even when we don’t have all the answers.

God’s sovereignty is not some impersonal philosophy to be fought over; it’s the sure hand that will one day wipe away every tear, crush evil, and make all things new. This is our hope: that the God who reigns with power will bring justice, healing, and peace. Until then, we stand firm in faith, trusting His wisdom and holding fast to His goodness.

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Chapter 4 Total Depravity

How deep is the wound?

Contemporary society presents an optimistic view of human nature where people are seen as inherently good, capable of living meaningful and fulfilling lives without God. The Bible, on the other hand, claims that human sinfulness, resulting from the Fall, is responsible for all the evils in the world; an idea that most moderns find shocking and offensive.

4.1 The Bible's perspective on human nature

When we look in a mirror, we see our physical characteristics but when we delve into scripture we see the condition of our soul and it paints a very unflattering picture. It employs vivid imagery to portray humanity's fallen state, describing us as spiritually sick, unclean, enemies of God, and dead in our sins[37]. Sin's influence is more than skin deep, reaching into every aspect of our existence, corrupting our minds, hearts, relationships, and even the environment.

Theological concepts such as "total depravity[38]," "radical corruption," and "original sin" capture the depth and breadth of human sinfulness. These terms emphasize that our moral and spiritual corruption is so deep that we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves or even responding to the gospel without divine intervention—a concept known as "total inability."

Why are we not as sinful as we could be?

The concept of total depravity explains the brokenness of the world around us—the violence, corruption, and selfishness. It's easy to see humanity as deeply flawed, but we all know people who don't share our faith, but still live honest, generous, and kind lives. We can also marvel at human achievements—the beauty of art, the advancement of science and the selfless work of many who dedicate their lives to helping others. These bright spots stand in stark contrast to the darker side of humanity.

So why is this? Why do we see both such goodness and such brokenness in people? How does the Bible explain this paradox of human nature?

First, humans retain traces of the divine image. We were made in God's likeness, so we have an inner sense—our conscience—that allows us distinguish between right and wrong. Second, God has not abandoned us to our sin. He actively engages with His creation, showing grace and kindness even to those who do not know Him. Third, the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin and righteousness, gently guiding them

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[37] Robert Schuller, founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral said, "I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ that has proven more destructive to human personality than the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition" Christianity Today, October 5, 1984

"I believe in positive thinking. It is almost as important as the resurrection of Jesus Christ"
Michael Nason, Robert Schuller the Inside Story, Word Books, 1983, pg. 152

[38] Perhaps a better term for the doctrine of total depravity would be radical corruption. The word radical derives from the Latin radix, which means "root." To say that mankind is radically corrupt is to say that sin penetrates to the root or core of our being. Sin is not tangential or peripheral but arises from the centre of our being, from what the Bible calls the "heart,"
Sproul R.C, What is Reformed Theology? Kindle edition, p138

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toward Jesus, who offers forgiveness and redemption. It is true that humans, in themselves, are completely enslaved to sin and hostile to God, but God has graciously not left us to ourselves. He has given us enough light so that, if we seek Him, we will find Him (Acts 17:27).

4.2 The Calvinist perspective on Total Depravity and salvation[39]

Calvinism's understanding of total depravity is that fallen humans, of themselves, are completely incapable of reaching out to God and believing in Christ, therefore God must provide everything necessary for salvation. This view highlights the sinfulness of man in contrast with the holiness of God, and also emphasises the principle of monergism which holds that God is the sole actor in salvation.

This being the case, the only way for humans to be saved is if God changes their nature and gives them the desire to seek Him, turn from sin and commit to Christ as Saviour. This sequence—regeneration before faith—is central to Calvinist doctrine[40]. In this view, only the elect are granted the gift of saving faith. Calvinists reject the idea that faith precedes regeneration, because it implies that salvation can be earned through human effort, which is contrary to the doctrine of grace alone.

4.3 The Arminian perspective on Total Depravity and salvation

Arminianism acknowledges humanity's complete inability to save itself and is therefore totally dependent on God's grace for redemption. To explain how salvation becomes possible for sinners, Arminians propound the concept of "prevenient grace"[41], a key component of their theological framework[42].

Prevenient Grace: God's initiative in salvation

Prevenient grace, as defined by Arminians, is the grace that God extends to individuals before they come to faith, enabling them to respond positively to the gospel. Arminians assert that prevenient grace is universally available—God offers it to all people, giving each individual the freedom to accept or reject it. This perspective aligns with the Arminian conviction that God's love is all-encompassing and that He desires all people to be saved. As a result, in the Arminian order of salvation, faith precedes regeneration; individuals first respond in faith to the gracious offer of the gospel and, on believing, the Holy Spirit regenerates them i.e. makes them new creations in Christ (Eph 1:13; 2 Cor 5:17).

Calvinist critique of prevenient grace

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[39] The moral inability of fallen man is the core concept of the doctrine of total depravity or radical corruption. If one embraces this aspect of the t in tulip, the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic. One cannot embrace the T and reject any of the other four letters with any degree of consistency. Sproul, R. C. What is Reformed Theology? Kindle Edition. P150

[40] The Reformed view of predestination teaches that before a person can choose Christ…he must be born again… One does not first believe, then become reborn. A cardinal point of Reformed theology is the maxim, 'Regeneration precedes faith'. Sproul, R. C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, p 72.

[41] Prevenient grace is seen as God's first movement toward the sinner, preparing the heart and leading them toward salvation. It's the initial grace that begins the journey toward faith, followed by justifying and sanctifying grace. https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-prevenient-grace.html#google_vignette

[42] The Arminian believes the presentation of prevenient grace is crucial to the Arminian system as it allows them to reconcile or hold together the positions of total depravity, salvation by grace, human responsibility, and the offer of salvation to all. Campbell, Nicholas. Tiptoeing Through TULIP. Kindle Edition. p111.

Calvinists are strongly opposed to the concept of prevenient grace. They question its biblical foundation and argue that the Arminian view introduces a synergistic element to salvation—one where human cooperation plays a role. For Calvinists, this undermines the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, by implying that human effort is involved in the process.

4.4 Examination of the issues raised

The debate between Arminians and Calvinists raises important questions about human ability to seek God and respond to His call.

Can non-believers seek God?

Calvinists argue that non-believers, who are described as "dead in sins," cannot seek God unless they are first regenerated. They liken spiritually dead sinners to physically dead bodies that cannot respond to the material world. In contrast, Arminians interpret the biblical phrase "dead in sins" metaphorically indicating a broken relationship rather than a biological inability to respond to God. They point to biblical examples such as Cornelius and Lydia, who sought God and were subsequently converted (Acts 10; 16), to demonstrate that non-believers can reach out to God (see also Acts 17:25 – 28) . Additionally, Arminians highlight the biblical promise that those who seek God will find Him, reinforcing the belief that sinners do have the capacity to seek God.

Does a call to respond imply ability?

Calvinists maintain that God's commands do not imply human ability to carry them out, suggesting that God is still just, even when some people are unable or unwilling to obey. Arminians strongly oppose this view, arguing that the Bible repeatedly calls humans to seek, come, believe, repent, and choose—actions that imply the ability to respond to God's initiatives[43]. The ordinary person reading their Bible would reasonably conclude that if God issues a command or extends an invitation, humans are capable of responding. This would be true of human fathers, how much more so for God.

The role of humans in salvation

The debate between Calvinists and Arminians revolves around the question of human involvement in salvation. Calvinists believe that humans, in their fallen state, cannot exercise faith or even desire salvation without God's direct intervention. They frequently criticise Arminianism for teaching that God's role is to provide salvation, while the human contribution is to believe, which is essentially synergistic.

Arminians, however, reject this accusation, claiming that faith is not a human contribution to salvation, nor does it imply any merit on the part of the believer. Instead, faith is simply acknowledging God's grace, and believing God's promise of salvation on condition of faith. Arminians argue that the charge of synergism is

[43] In Jeremiah 7 God repeatedly sent his prophets urging the people to repent or face the punishment for their sin. That God sent prophets to them over and over, suggests not only that He wanted them to repent but also that they were able to do so. They could have repented but freely chose not to do so.

Walls, J and Dongell, J. "Why I Am Not a Calvinist" (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 117.

more accurately directed at Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagianism[44], which deny total depravity and hold that humans can initiate their own salvation. Arminian theology upholds the necessity of God's grace at every step, maintaining that while humans are called to respond, their response is entirely due to God's grace.

This debate over faith, regeneration, and the nature of God's sovereignty often boils down to two opposing theological perspectives: *Monergism* and *Synergism*. Monergism, derived from Greek words meaning "one person working," holds that salvation is entirely God's work. He initiates, accomplishes, and completes the entire process, with no assistance from humans. Synergism, on the other hand, means "two people working" and suggests that salvation involves cooperation between God and humans. In this view, God provides the means of salvation through the cross, and humans provide the faith to complete the process.

Arminians reject the accusation of synergism, claiming that their understanding of salvation is entirely dependent on God's grace. For Arminians, faith is not a work that earns salvation but rather an act of trust in God's promise, a recognition that humans are utterly incapable of saving themselves and must rely solely on God's merit. Classical Arminianism claims to be monergistic because it recognises that humans contribute nothing to their salvation.

Now it's your turn

Before you move on, why not dig into the Scripture passages in Appendix A? You might discover some surprising insights. Think about it: Does the Bible lean towards Calvinism or Arminianism, or leave room for a plot twist?

What's the point?

There is no need to debate the extent of human depravity. Both Calvinists and Arminians agree it is total, and salvation must be all of God.

The crux of the matter lies in the way God overcomes human depravity.

Does He extend prevenient grace to everyone, thus enabling the will to respond to His offer of salvation (as Arminians teach)? Or: Are humans so completely passive that no one can respond until God first regenerates those who will then believe (as Calvinists teach)?

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[44] In 431 A.D. Pelagianism was condemned in Ephesus by the third ecumenical council of Christianity because it affirmed natural and moral human ability to do God's will apart from the special operation of divine grace. Semi-Pelagianism was condemned by the Second Council of Orange in A.D. 529 because it affirmed human ability to exercise a good will toward God apart from special assistance of divine grace; it places the initiative on the human side, but Scripture places it on the divine side. Arminians consider both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism heresies.

Olson, Roger E.. Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities IVP. Kindle Edition. p 81.

From doctrine to devotion

At first glance, the doctrine of Total Depravity may appear bleak, However, when properly understood, it has a profound impact on how we view ourselves, others and God's grace. Its truth leads us to humility, remembering what we were, but also inspires deep gratitude for His unspeakable grace.

We see ourselves in truth: We need to confront the full weight of our sin—the power it held over us and the subtlety with which it corrupted us. How lost and helpless we felt. We were completely in its grasp, but God never gave up on us. He reached down and drew us to Himself, bringing us out of darkness into marvellous light. Accepted as His child and welcomed into God's family, sin no longer has dominion over us; we are set free to love and serve God. Our hearts should overflow with joy and thankfulness for the grace that set us free

We see others through grace: This doctrine also opens our eyes to humanity's shared brokenness. We all carry the burden of a fallen nature, and this realisation should make us more compassionate, patient and eager to extend the same grace we've received. It fuels our evangelism, drives us to fervent prayer and bold proclamation, knowing that God alone can transform lives—even those we might consider hopeless. No one is beyond the reach of God's grace.

We see God in His glory: Most significantly, this doctrine reveals the incredible nature of God's grace. When we truly grasp how utterly lost we were—how hostile to God and incapable of saving ourselves—our response can only be one of awe and worship. It brings us to our knees, not in defeat but in wonder, lifting our hearts in grateful praise for the love that met us at our lowest and raised us to the heights of fellowship with God. Here we find the paradox of Christian joy: the greater our recognition of our desperate need, the higher our appreciation of His amazing grace.

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Chapter 5 Unconditional election

Is our fate pre-determined?

The doctrine of election is the teaching that God, with perfect foreknowledge, chose specific individuals for salvation before the world was created. This concept is rooted in key biblical texts such as Romans 8:29-30, Ephesians 1:4-5, and 1 Peter 1:2, all of which affirm that God's choice was made in eternity past, independent of human action or merit.

5.1 Foreknowledge

To fully comprehend the doctrine of election, it is essential to understand the concept of foreknowledge which, as a manifestation of God's omniscience, denotes His comprehensive awareness of everything that happens, or will happen, or could happen. Unlike humans, whose knowledge is bound by time and sequence, God sees all events—past, present, and future—as a single, timeless reality.

Arminians understand God's foreknowledge in terms of prescience which simply means that He knows everything in advance. They define election as that sovereign gracious act of God whereby he chose in Christ for salvation all those whom he foreknew would respond positively to prevenient grace. Arminians believe that God foreknows the future free choices of individuals without necessarily causing them[45].

Calvinists agree that God knows everything, including things yet future but believe that God knows the future because he has sovereignly decreed it. They see deeper meanings to the word "foreknow"[46]. First, they observe that the word "know" as used in Scripture (Amos 3:2; Matt 7:23; Gen 4:1) sometimes denotes an intimate relationship, so God has identified, from eternity, those upon whom He will set His special care and love. Second, they claim that the word "foreknow" is virtually identical with the word "foreordain"[47], implying that if God knows something before it happens, it must be because He determined it to happen. This means that election is based on God's choice, not man's.

5.2 Election - Key Ideas

The doctrines of election and predestination are inextricably linked with God's foreknowledge (1 Pet 1:2 and Rom 8:28). Election relates to those whom God intends to bless, whereas predestination refers to the plans God has for them. Election has to do with people, predestination to purpose.

We begin with election.

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[45] "If I decide to go fishing tomorrow morning, God knows that and has always known it, because He knows everything truly and exhaustively….. So if, in eternity past, God knew that I would go fishing at 7: 00 a.m. tomorrow, then it is certain that I will do so, but it is not necessary. The only reason God knew that I would go is because of my choice to go. My will was the cause of my action, not God's knowledge. Things are caused by other things than knowledge of them, whether divine or human."

Matthew Pinson, 40 Questions About Arminianism, Kregel publications, 2022, p. 265.

[46] FF Bruce in his commentary on Romans 8:29 says: the word "foreknow" has "that connotation of electing grace" such that "when God takes knowledge of people in this special way, He sets His choice on them". (Eerdman, 1963, p177).

[47] "God foreknows what will be because He has decreed what shall be. There is no mere foresight in God. He sees what is to be because He has purposed it, and it will come to pass".

Pink. A.W, The Doctrine of Election and Justification (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1974), 172.

Election is described in several ways throughout Scripture. The concept of being "chosen to serve" can be seen in the lives of specific individuals who were selected for particular roles, such as kings, priests, and apostles. These roles were not necessarily linked to the individual's personal salvation but were rather part of God's broader plan for humanity. Examples include Pharaoh, Cyrus, and Judas, who were chosen to serve God's divine purpose, even if those purposes were not redemptive.

Corporate Election refers to the election of a group, most notably believers who are said to be "chosen in Him", referring to Jesus Christ who is "elect of God". This aspect of election is corporate and inclusive, with individuals becoming part of the elect through their union with Christ by faith. God's election of Israel as His covenant people is also an example of corporate election, with individual participation in the true Israel, dependant on personal faith.

Individual Election, on the other hand, is concerned with God's decision to save specific people. Within this framework, Calvinism teaches unconditional election in which God's choice is solely based on His will and grace, not on any foreseen faith or merit in the individual. This doctrine guarantees that those whom God has chosen will certainly come to faith and persevere in it. On the other hand, Arminianism proposes conditional election, based on God's knowledge of who will believe.

Election and its challenges

Unconditional election[48] asserts that God's choice of the elect is solely determined by His sovereign will and grace. This doctrine holds that God's election is eternal (decided before the world was made), irreversible (God does not unelect anyone), and efficacious (the elect will certainly come to faith and continue in it). However, this view raises several objections. Critics argue that it relies on a deterministic view of sovereignty which undermines human free will and portrays God as arbitrary and potentially unjust. It also calls into question the genuineness of the gospel offer.

According to Arminianism, "the Bible does teach election but not unconditional election". It teaches conditional election which is built on the Bible's declaration of God's love for everyone, that salvation is available to everyone and that humans are free moral agents, able to respond to the gospel invitation thereby determining whether they will ultimately be saved or lost. However, this also has its critics. Opponents argue that the Bible does not explicitly state that election is based on foreseen faith which would make salvation dependent on human initiative, potentially undermining God's sovereignty[49].

It should be noted that some Arminians concede the difficulty of grounding election on an individual's foreknown faith and some Calvinists acknowledge the tension inherent in a doctrine where God chooses to save some and reject others.

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[48] "God has predestined and foreordained some men and angels to everlasting life out of His free grace and love without any foresight of faith or works in man or perseverance in either of them, and others are foreordained to everlasting death and the number of either is so certain and definite that it cannot be increased or diminished."

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. III, art. 3,4 &5; Chap. X, art. 2.

[49] "Conditional election implies that God waits to see what we will do before He elects us, which places human decision at the heart of salvation. This not only diminishes God's sovereignty but also implies that some element of salvation is earned by human effort, violating the doctrine of grace." Sproul, Chosen by God (1986)

5.3 Predestination

The doctrine of predestination asserts that God predetermines and orchestrates all events in the universe according to His unchanging plan which includes all means and ends, but does not make God the author of sin or evil. Rather, God's sovereignty upholds human freedom and integrates it into His divine purposes.

The many blessings of election are seen in the following: the elect are predestined to be called (Rom. 8:30), justified (Ro 3:24, 8:30), glorified (Ro 8:30), conformed to the likeness of his Son (Ro 8:29), adopted as God's children and more…

All of this is, of course, wonderful news for the elect, but perhaps the more pressing questions concern those God has not chosen to save. As R.C. Sproul says "it is not enough to think about Jacob, we must also consider Esau"[50] (Mal 1:2,3; Rom 9:13). Calvinists and Arminians have different perspectives on this issue.

Views on the non-elect (reprobate)

Single Predestination, sometimes described as Soft Calvinism, holds that while God actively saves the elect, He simply passes over the non-elect, leaving them to suffer the consequences of their sins. This view upholds God's justice, asserting that, since no one deserves salvation, and since they have rejected God's offer of salvation, their judgment reflects their personal accountability.

In contrast, **Double Predestination**, sometimes called "equal ultimacy", holds that God actively predestines some to salvation and others to damnation, a view that emphasizes God's sovereign will but raises significant theological and moral concerns. Sproul calls this the "scary view"[51] and Calvin describes it as the "horrible decree"[52], because it sees a symmetry between the work of God in election and his work in reprobation. The key idea is that just as God intervenes in the lives of the elect to create faith in their hearts, so he also intervenes in the lives of the reprobate to instil unbelief in their hearts.

Arminians reject the concept of reprobation[53], arguing that it misrepresents the God revealed in Jesus Christ. They maintain that if anyone is lost eternally, it will be because they rejected the gospel, not because of an irreversible decree. This perspective insists that God's love and justice are consistent with His desire for all to be saved.

5.5 Reprobation

The reason why God chooses to save some people while condemning others remains beyond human comprehension, but those who believe in this doctrine emphasize the necessity of accepting it as part of

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[50] Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, p141

[51] Sproul, R. C. What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. p185.

[52] "The decree is, dreadful, and I confess, a horrible decree; yet no one can deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, and foreknew, because he so ordained by his decree." Calvin, Book III, Chapter 23, Section 7

[53] "The Arminian view of predestination holds that God predestines believers to be saved, but does not predestine anyone to damnation. Damnation is the result of human rejection of God's gracious offer of salvation."
Olson, Roger E.. Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities IVP. Kindle Edition Chapter 8

the revealed truth of Scripture. Key biblical passages such as Romans 9:22, 11:7, 1 Thessalonians 5:9, 1 Peter 2:8, and Jude 4 are frequently cited in support of this concept.

The Calvinist perspective on reprobation

From the Calvinist viewpoint, reprobation must be understood within the context of God's glory and sovereignty[54]. Calvinism teaches that all God's actions, whether relating to the salvation of the elect or the judgment of the non-elect, ultimately serve to reveal His supreme glory. God's amazing grace and unimaginable love could not be fully displayed if there was no sin to be forgiven. The greater the sin, the greater the forgiveness and the greater the rejoicing over sinners coming home. This we can understand, but Calvinists apply the same principle to the non-elect:

Jonathan Edwards wrote: "It is necessary, that God's awful majesty and dreadful greatness should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed". God's attributes of holiness and wrath could not be fully displayed without there being sinners whom God punishes in hell for eternity. Sinners in hell will see God in His full-orbed glory and acknowledge His justice and their own sinfulness[55].

To address the inherent difficulties of this doctrine, Calvinists make several points:

They claim that while God does love all His creatures, He does not love them all in the same way. The love He extends to the elect is salvific, meaning it leads to their salvation, whereas His love for the non-elect is seen in common grace and does not result in their redemption. Furthermore, although God is glorified through both salvation and judgment, Calvinists emphasize that God does not take pleasure in the damnation of the wicked in the way he takes pleasure in the salvation of the elect. To explain this tension, Calvinists propose the idea that God has two wills: a revealed will, in which He desires the salvation of all, and a secret will, which decrees that only the elect will be saved.

Arminian counterarguments to reprobation

Arminians strongly oppose the doctrine of reprobation, arguing that it is both theologically flawed and brings the character of God into disrepute[56]. The scriptural support for this view is neither extensive nor

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[54] "Reprobation is God's eternal, sovereign, unconditional, immutable, wise, holy, and mysterious decree whereby, in electing some to eternal life, he passes others by, and then justly condemns them for their own sin—all to his own glory."
Palmer, Edwin. The Five Points of Calvinism: Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010, p117.

"God did not just pass over the non-elect. He assigned them their place in His plan for the glory of His justice. In this sense, God's decree of reprobation is active, not passive. It is a sobering and terrifying reality, but one that glorifies God's holiness."
John Piper, The Justification of God, Chapter 9.

[55] The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 2, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1834, Reprinted 1974, p. 527-528.

[56] Arminians have always opposed belief in unconditional reprobation—God's selection of some persons to spend eternity in hell. Because they oppose that, they also oppose unconditional election—the selection of some persons out of the mass of sinners to be saved apart from anything God sees in them. According to Arminians the two are inextricably linked; it is impossible to affirm unconditional selection of some to salvation without at the same time affirming unconditional selection of some to reprobation, which, Arminians believe, impugns the character of God.
Olson, Roger E.. Arminian Theology (pp. 14-15). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

unequivocal, but more troubling, the doctrine implies that God needed evil to exist and sinners to punish, in order to display His glory, with the further suggestion that God's glory was not manifest before creation.

The implications of reprobation are stark. If this doctrine is true, then the non-elect are doomed from eternity, having no hope of escaping their fate, unable to seek God or be born again[57]. This portrayal is difficult to reconcile with the God revealed in Jesus Christ, full of grace and compassion, a God who does not afflict willingly and desires that none should perish but all should come to repentance[58].

Reprobation also raises familiar objections often levelled against deterministic theology, such as whether it makes God the author of sin, how it reconciles with the claim that God desires the salvation of all, and how humans can be held accountable for their actions.

Now it's your turn

Before moving on, take a moment to explore the biblical references in Appendix A. Consider: In what ways do these verses support or contradict the main arguments presented in this chapter?

What's the point?

Despite their differences, Calvinists and Arminians share several important foundational beliefs about foreknowledge, election and predestination. They both believe

- God is truly omniscient - possessing complete knowledge of all things, past, present, and future
- Humans are accountable for their moral choices
- All three doctrines are portrayed as being from all eternity.

So these issues need not be debated. They are clearly biblical doctrines.

The key points of disagreement are:

Foreknowledge: Does God know everything in advance because He determines everything or because He is omniscient? Can God have foreknowledge of every free will action without actively determining them?

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[57] "They are doomed from the womb to certain death by the eternal will of God. If it is asked why they are so predestined, we must say: because it is His good pleasure to do so. For His will is the highest rule of justice."

Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, Ch. 23, Sec. 6

"God's decree of reprobation is as absolute as His decree of election. The reprobate are not merely passed over, but foreordained to eternal punishment. They cannot seek God, cannot believe, cannot repent—for God has willed their damnation."

Pink, A.W. The sovereignty of God, ch 5

[58] John Wesley said "You suppose him [God] to send them [the reprobate] into eternal fire, for not escaping from sin! That is, in plain terms, for not having that grace which God had decreed they should never have! O strange justice! What a picture do you draw of the Judge of all the earth! God is not exalted by unconditional election but rather "dishonoured, and that in the highest degree". To Wesley, the doctrine of double predestination is "a doctrine full of blasphemy. It destroys all of God's attributes (love, justice, compassion, etc.) and represents the most holy God as "worse than the devil, as both more false, more cruel and more unjust.""

Olson, Roger E.. Against Calvinism: Zondervan. Kindle Edition. p126.

Election: On what basis does God choose the elect? Is it based on reasons only He knows, or because He foresees those who will believe in Christ?

Predestination: While we rejoice in what God does for the elect, is there sufficient biblical evidence to suggest that His punishment of the non-elect serves to display His glory? Will people end up in hell because God decreed this will be their end or, because they refused God's offer of salvation?

From doctrine to devotion

The doctrines of election and predestination reveal something profound: before time began, the sovereign God purposefully included each believer in His eternal plan, not because of anything we had done, but purely because it pleased Him to do it.

It is incredible to think that before the first star was flung into space, God had already set His heart upon us, writing each believer into His grand narrative of redemption. God's election is a demonstration of His love, revealing that every believer is chosen with a purpose—to be conformed to the image of Christ and to walk in the good works that God has prepared for us.

This knowledge becomes an anchor in life's storms. When uncertainty looms or challenges press in, we can rest in the assurance that every moment fits within God's eternal design. Our trials and suffering are not random or meaningless; they are part of the tapestry God is weaving to bring us closer to Him and prepare us for His presence.

We are part of a story that is much larger than ourselves—a story that God Himself is writing, with the ending already written. This is our hope, confidence, and joy: that the God who has foreknown, elected, and predestined us will also sustain us and eventually bring us into the fullness of His glory.

In a world where uncertainty breeds anxiety, the knowledge that God sees the entire scope of our lives, from beginning to end, brings peace. In the midst of chaos and unpredictability, the doctrine of predestination anchors us in the unshakable truth that God's plans will not fail. We are not victims of random chance or blind fate. Rather, we are safe in the hands of a sovereign God who directs everything for His glory and our good.

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Chapter 6 Limited Atonement

Is Jesus' sacrifice for everyone or just a select few?

Limited atonement is probably the most contentious issue within TULIP to the extent that even some Calvinists, known as "4-point Calvinists," reject it outright.

6.1 Concept of Atonement:

To grasp the concept of atonement, we must first examine its meaning in both secular and theological contexts. In everyday language, atonement refers to actions taken to right a wrong in order to restore good relationships. However, in theology, atonement takes on a deeper significance. It refers to what Jesus accomplished through His life and death: satisfying divine justice, redeeming humanity from sin, and re-establishing our broken relationship with God. The English word “atonement” originally meant “at-one-ment” or “at-one-with”, meaning “to be in harmony with” or “at one mind with”. So, atonement is about bringing God and humans together.

The atonement, is central to the gospel and was provided at God’s initiative (2 Cor 5:19). The necessity of this act cannot be overstated—sin is not a minor misstep but an act of rebellion against God’s holy character, subjecting humanity to His just judgment. If salvation was to be possible, a sacrifice was required to appease His wrath and satisfy His justice[59] (Heb 9:22). Jesus’ death dealt decisively with the sin that separated us from God.

6.2 Nature of the Atonement:

Both Arminians and Calvinists reject the notion of universalism, which holds that Christ's death saves everyone, however, they differ significantly about the extent of the atonement i.e. for whom exactly did Jesus die. Arminianism holds that while Christ died for everyone, the benefits of the atonement are only available to those who believe. This view is often referred to as unlimited or general atonement. Calvinism, on the other hand, asserts that Christ died only for the elect, those whom God predestined to be saved. This is known as limited atonement, and it guarantees the salvation of the elect.

The intent behind the atonement further differentiates the two positions. Arminians argue that Christ's death removed every barrier separating humankind from God, making salvation accessible to all. Calvinists, however, believe that Christ’s death was specifically designed to save only the elect[60] and that it effectively accomplished that goal[61].

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[59] “The atonement was necessary because God sovereignly determined to forgive sin on no other condition…. Calvinists maintain the absolute necessity of the atonement and ground it particularly in the justice of God …. They regard it as the only way in which God could pardon sin and at the same time satisfy His justice”. Berkhof, Louis, Systematic Theology, p369

[60] "God does not save all sinners, for ultimately he does not intend to save all of them. The gift of faith is necessary for salvation, yet for reasons beyond our ken, the gift of faith has not been given to all. While God commands all to repent and takes no delight in the death of the sinner, all are not saved because it is not God's intention to give his redeeming grace to all." Peterson and Williams, "Why I am not an Arminian" p130

[61] Historical or main line Calvinism has consistently maintained that Christ’s redeeming work was definite in design and accomplishment – that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and for no one else . . . Christ did not die simply to make it possible for God to pardon sinners. Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, Five Points of Calvinism, pp39-40,

Arminians and Calvinists agree that the death of Christ has sufficient value to save every human being, but not everyone is saved because:

- Many individuals decline God's offer of salvation (Arminianism).
- God's intention was to save only the elect (Calvinism).

The application of the atonement is another critical factor. Salvation is not complete until the sinner receives the benefits of the atonement. This dual aspect is seen in such passages as 2 Corinthians 5 where verse 18 states that God has reconciled the world to Himself and verses 19 and 20, where Paul pleads with his hearers to be reconciled to God. Redemption encompasses both Christ's objective provision of salvation and the believer's subjective acceptance of it[62].

6.3 Unlimited (or General) Atonement (Arminian View)

From the Arminian perspective, the doctrine of unlimited atonement finds strong support both in scripture and church history. They contend that a natural reading of scripture supports the idea that Christ's death was intended for everyone[63]. They point to the use of inclusive language in the Bible—words like "all," "world," and "whosoever"—as evidence that God desires the salvation of all people, not just the elect[64].

Historically, before Augustine (354 – 430) unlimited atonement was the dominant view in the early church. Arminians believe that those closest to the apostles are unlikely to have been mistaken on this crucial issue. It wasn't until the Reformation that the concept of limited atonement gained traction, and even then, many reformers, including Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon, did not fully endorse it[65].

Theologically, general atonement avoids the problems that come with limited atonement. It seems disingenuous, Arminians argue, to preach that salvation is available to all if, in reality, only a select few are eligible. Moreover, limited atonement implies that God does not love everyone equally, casting doubt on

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[62] "Vicarious atonement without faith in it is powerless to save. It is not the making of this atonement but the trusting in it, that saves the sinner. . . . Unless His objective work is subjectively appropriated, it is useless, so far as personal salvation is concerned." Shedd, Dogmatic Theology, 2:440-441.

[63] "We ask the advocates of limited atonement "what words could have been used to convey the idea of general redemption? How could it better have been expressed if it is not taught in such texts as John 1:29, John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 5:19, 1Timothy 2:6; Titus 2:11, Hebrews 2:9, 1 John 2:2"? Douty, Norman: Did Christ die only for the elect?, Wipf and Stock Publishers, p4.

[64] "Christ is...a Saviour for all mankind....He did not suffer for a few persons only, but for all mankind....What Christ took away, and bore on the cross, was not the sin of certain people only, but the whole accumulated mass of all the sins of all the children of Adam....I hold as strongly as anyone that Christ's death is profitable to none but the elect who believe in His Name..... But I dare not confine the intention of redemption to the saints alone. Christ is for every man....The atonement was made for all the world, though it is applied and enjoyed by none but believers." J C Ryle Expository thoughts on the Gospels, John 1:29.

[65] One fourth of the delegates (who were all Calvinists) at the Council of Dort and one third of the compilers of the Westminster Confession rejected limited atonement. The English and Swiss reformers believed in universal atonement, as did the Lutherans. The doctrine was really developed by second generation Reformers led by Calvin's successor, Beza.
Daniel, Curt. History and theology of Calvinism, Ch 8 p75, Ch57 p421

His fairness and justice. Also, it seems unjust to punish the non-elect for failing to achieve something that was never within their reach[66].

6.4 Limited Atonement (Calvinist view)

Moderate Calvinism is totally committed to the concept of limited atonement[67] which holds that Christ died only for those whom God has chosen, guaranteeing their perseverance and ultimate glory. To avoid misunderstandings, some Calvinists prefer the terms "definite atonement" or "particular redemption," which emphasize the specific and intentional nature of Christ's sacrifice.
Calvinists find biblical support for definite atonement in passages like: Matt 1:21: (His people); John 10:15-18: (the sheep); Gal 2:20: (me); Eph 5:25: (the church). They also argue that terms like "world" and "all" in the Bible are context-dependent, frequently referring to the elect rather than humanity as a whole.

Theologically, Calvinists support limited atonement through the concept of the Covenant of Redemption. In this eternal covenant, the Father chose the elect, the Son died for them, and the Holy Spirit works in their lives to bring them to salvation. They also highlight Christ's dual role as both priest and sacrifice, particularly in John 17, where He prays, not for the world, but for those given to Him by the Father—those for whom He died. Limited atonement is inextricably linked to other points in the TULIP framework, such as unconditional election and irresistible grace. Together, they form a coherent theological system which provides a comprehensive account of the salvation of the elect.

Furthermore, Calvinists argue that God's will is always accomplished[68], so, if Christ died for everyone, but not everyone is saved, it would imply a failure in His mission. They also present the "double payment" argument, which holds that if Christ paid for everyone's sins, it would be unjust to punish anyone a second time. Therefore, Christ's sacrifice must have been intended exclusively for the elect.

Challenges to Limited Atonement

Despite the strong arguments for limited atonement, critics raise several objections. They point out that the Bible does not explicitly state that Jesus died exclusively for the elect. On the contrary, numerous passages state that He died for everyone.
Arminians claim that Calvinism takes the simplicity of the gospel and adds layers of complexity[69], which derive more from theological necessity than biblical exegesis. They also argue that it casts doubt on God's character, particularly His fairness and justice, thus undermining the credibility of the gospel.

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[66] "Only if God makes the same provision for all, and makes the same offer to all, is He truly just".
Thiessen, Henry C. Lectures in Systematic Theology, Eerdmans, p260.

[67] "Christ died only for the believer, the elect, only for those who will actually be saved and go to heaven. According to the Calvinist, Christ intended or purposed that his atonement should pay for the sins of only those the Father had given him."
Palmer, Edwin. The Five Points of Calvinism. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010,) p. 50

[68] God's designs are always efficacious and can never be frustrated by man. Had God intended all men to be saved by the death of Christ, then all would be saved. Therefore, … Christ could not have died for everyone, because not everyone is saved.
W. A. Elwell, "Atonement, Extent of the" in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, (Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2001), p98

[69] it would be extremely difficult for us to devise a doctrine which would be more out of harmony with plain Biblical teaching than the doctrine of Limited Atonement. The plain man reading his bible and taking the words at face value, would never in a thousand years arrive at such an understanding of the work of Christ. Limited atonement is a doctrine in search of a text. It is a theological deduction based on a certain understanding of predestination and election". .

These distinctions can now be added to our diagram:

Hyper Calvinism	Moderate Calvinism	4 Point Calvinism	Classical Arminianism	Semi - Pelagianism
No free will	Compatibilistic freedom		Free to choose otherwise	
God decreed the Fall	Efficacious permission		God permitted the Fall	Fall partial
Jesus died for the elect only		Jesus died for everyone		

Explanation of universal verses How are we to understand the verses saying that Christ died for all?[70]

Calvinists approach these verses in two different ways.
Some take the view that it is not so much an "either-or" but a "both-and" situation. Christ died for the whole world and for the elect. A key verse in this context is 1 Timothy 4: 10 "God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe". They recognise two sets of bible evidence – the unlimited and the limited and argue that God loves all people but not in the same way he loves the elect[71]. Christ died for all, though not for all in the same way[72]. They accept the many verses that say Christ died for all, yet also insist that there is a sense He died only for the elect. Any explanation must lie in the realm of mystery. Arminians agree there are mysteries in Scripture which cannot be explained, such as the Trinity or the two natures of Christ in one person. However, the "mysteries" here are created by the demands of the Calvinist system.

The second way of explaining the inclusive verses is to say that when the bible speaks of God loving the world or Christ dying for all, we must understand that the words "world" and "all" can have different meanings in different contexts (details can be found in Appendix A). They often refer to a particular class or group of people. In Limited Atonement, this argument takes a giant step forward by claiming that, in a salvation context, the words "world" and "all" never mean everybody. They always refer to a smaller group, namely, the elect.

Arminians ask "why, if God intended for Jesus to die only for the elect, would He so inspire the words of Scripture which use such all-inclusive terms (i.e., the world, every man etc.)"[73]. They argue that we should take the plain sense of these and many other verses i.e. that Christ died for everyone.

"Where are the Christians who come to believe in limited atonement through a private reading of the scriptures. Nowhere. The reason they do not is apparent because the arguments employed to support the doctrine are too involved, too complicated, too ingenious". Douty, Norman: Did Christ die only for the elect?, Wipf and Stock Publishers, p3

[70] Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:18; 1 Timothy 2:5,6; 4:10; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 2:2

[71] "We do not deny that Christ died to save all in some sense. What we deny is that the death of Christ is for all men in the same sense. Piper, John. Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God (Christian Focus, 2013), p40

[72] Richard Baxter wrote, "Christ died for all, but not for all equally, or with the same intent, design or purpose." Daniel, Curt. History and theology of Calvinism, Ch 57.

[73] Badger, Anthony B. TULIP: a free grace perspective, part 3: limited atonement.

Now it's your turn
You know the drill…..

What's the point?
Both sides agree that:

- The sacrifice of Christ was sufficient for the salvation of all people.
- Faith and repentance are required for salvation.
- Some people will be saved and some will be lost.
- The gospel must be preached to all people.

There are several points of disagreement:

1 Why some will be saved and some lost.
    Arminians say people will be lost because they refused God's offer of mercy.
    Calvinists say it is ultimately because God did not intend to save them.
2 For whom did Jesus die?
    The Arminian view is that Jesus died for all, making salvation possible for everyone.
    Calvinists say that Jesus died to save only the elect.
3 What did the death of Christ accomplish?
    Arminians say it removed the barriers separating humans and God, making salvation possible.
    Calvinists assert that the cross actually secured the salvation of the elect.

How do we square the many passages in the Bible stating that God desires the salvation of all people with the teaching that he has provided salvation only for the elect?

From doctrine to devotion

As we conclude our study of the atonement, we move beyond theological systems to the heart of our faith: the cross of Jesus Christ. While Christians may differ in their understanding of its precise mechanics, we stand united in awe before this act of unparalleled love and sacrifice. We are united by the central truth that Jesus died for sinners, and His sacrifice is sufficient to redeem everyone who believes. Whether we understand the scope of that atonement in terms of particular redemption or a more universal offer, the cross calls us to worship and gratitude. It reminds us that salvation is, at its heart, a gift of grace, not something we could earn or achieve on our own.

At the centre of our faith is this truth: The Son of God laid down His life in an act of immeasurable love. The perfect One died for the imperfect. The Author of life tasted death so that we might live. These are not theological abstractions but transformative realities that unite believers across centuries and traditions.

In our darkest moments, all believers find comfort, not in our theological precision, but in the person of Christ and His finished work. When doubts assail, we look not to our understanding but to His faithfulness. When guilt oppresses, we rest not in our theories but in His promises.

The doctrine of the atonement, then, is not a point of division but a call to mission. Together, we proclaim Christ crucified – the power and wisdom of God. We invite all to find refuge in His sacrifice, rejoicing that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Here, at the foot of the cross, we bow before mystery and majesty, where justice and mercy meet, where love and holiness embrace, and where God has provided a salvation that will be the subject of eternal contemplation and praise.

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Chapter 7 Irresistible Grace

The great banquet – can anyone come or is it by invitation only?

Some Bible passages liken the idea of grace using the image of a lavish banquet, where a feast of divine mercy and love has been prepared. But is the invitation open to everyone, or is it reserved for a select few? This is the question before us in this chapter.

7.1 Understanding Grace

Grace is one of the most fundamental concepts in Christian belief, often described as God's "unmerited favour towards the undeserving." But grace is multifaceted, taking on different forms depending on the context.

Common grace[74] is God's general benevolence, extended to all His creatures, enabling them to live meaningful and moral lives. Although it does not lead directly to salvation, everyone benefits from it.

Then there is irresistible grace, a concept closely tied to the doctrines of total inability and unconditional election. This form of grace is not just a gentle nudge; it is a powerful force that overcomes the resistance of those God has chosen. It secures the salvation of the elect by providing them with the faith to believe.

Central to Arminianism, on the other hand, is the idea of prevenient grace, which explains God's pre-conversion work, drawing sinners toward Jesus. Unlike irresistible grace, prevenient grace can be resisted. It is a grace that frees the individual to either accept or reject the Spirit's call.

7.2 Irresistible Grace[75]

The Calvinist perspective on irresistible grace emphasizes God's absolute sovereignty in the salvation process, leaving no room for human boasting. This grace is deemed "irresistible" not because it forces people against their will, but because it achieves its intended purpose—the salvation of the elect.

Calvinists argue that irresistible grace is monergistic, meaning it is solely the work of God, with humans contributing nothing to their salvation. Some Calvinists prefer to use the term "efficacious" grace, to avoid the misconception that the Holy Spirit compels people to come to Jesus against their will[76].

Both the elect and the non-elect initially resist God's grace. However, at the appointed time, the Holy Spirit overcomes resistance in the elect, regenerating their hearts and granting them the faith to believe.

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[74] "Common grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation. …. Common grace is different from saving grace in its results (it does not bring about salvation), in its recipients (it is given to believers and unbelievers alike), and in its source (it does not directly flow from Christ's atoning work, …)". Source Unknown

[75] "When Calvinists refer to irresistible grace, they mean to say that the Holy Spirit is able, when he so chooses, to overcome all human resistance and so cause his gracious work to be utterly effective and ultimately irresistible".. Ware, Bruce. The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will, Volume 2, Ed Schreiner and Ware [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995], 347).

[76] "It is to be lamented that the term irresistible grace has ever been used, since it suggests the idea of a mechanical and coercive influence upon an unwilling subject, while, in truth, it is the transcendent act of the infinite Creator, making the creature spontaneously willing." A.A Hodge, Outlines of Theology, p452.

Irresistible grace, an important expression of the sovereignty of God[77], logically follows from the doctrines of total depravity, unconditional election, and limited atonement.

Objections to Irresistible Grace

Arminians, however, challenge the notion of irresistible grace on several fronts. Acts 7:21 is just one of many biblical verses cited to demonstrate that people do in fact reject God's grace, while other verses warn of the consequences of doing so (Galatians 2:21; 2 Corinthians 6:1; Hebrews 12:15). Another objection is that if only the elect are drawn to God, the act of preaching the gospel seems disingenuous. Moreover, if God withholds the gift of faith from the non-elect, it raises questions about the fairness of holding them accountable for their unbelief. Additionally, Arminians contend that grace, by its very nature, must be freely given and received, not imposed on unwilling individuals.

7.3 Prevenient Grace[78]

In contrast, Arminians stress prevenient grace, which describes God's initiative in pointing sinners from unbelief to faith. This grace is based on the biblical teaching that God wants all people to be saved and that Christ died for everyone. As with Irresistible Grace, the elect are brought to salvation by a sovereign and loving God through the Holy Spirit who creates an awareness of God, sin, and the need for Christ. Prevenient grace is resistible, so humans can reject the convicting entreaties of the Holy Spirit. However, when accepted, this grace prepares the heart to respond positively to God's gracious invitation. It affirms the Reformation principles that salvation comes from God's grace alone, through faith alone, not something earned by human effort. It should be noted that Prevenient Grace does not save anyone. Its function is to prepare our hearts so that we can choose freely to accept or reject God's gracious invitation[79].

Objections and responses to prevenient grace

Critics of prevenient grace argue that it implies humans can thwart God's plan by resisting the Holy Spirit. Arminians, however, believe that prevenient grace actually enhances God's sovereignty by demonstrating how He incorporates human free decisions into His divine purposes.

Another objection is that prevenient grace suggests salvation results from human effort, so faith is what humans contribute. Arminians counter this by asserting that accepting the gift of salvation is not the same as working for it – quite the opposite, in fact; it is simply the recognition of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness.

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[77] "The truth of irresistible grace establishes the truth of the sovereignty of God. If God is sovereign, the grace of God must be an irresistible grace. To deny irresistible grace is to deny really the sovereignty of God. Then God and God's will are dependent on man and man's will. Then Christ is reduced to a beggar. And the Holy Spirit is a weakling. God is put in the position of Darius who earnestly desired to save Daniel from the lion's den, but could not. Because God is God, the almighty God, His grace is irresistible grace. Cammenga R.and Hanko R. Saved by grace, Ch5 Section G https://www.prca.org/books/SavedByGrace.html#E5

[78] "Prevenient grace is that grace which precedes human decision. It is God's enabling presence that precedes anything we do. It's offered to all, and it makes it possible for anyone to respond to God's call." Jacob Arminius, "The Works of James Arminius," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works1.i.html

[79] Prevenient grace elicits the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning His will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against Him. It is the divine love that surrounds all humanity and enables humans to respond to God's offer of salvation, working prior to and independent of any human response."
Wesley, John. "Sermon 85: On Working Out Our Own Salvation"

Finally, some argue that Arminianism's emphasis on universal atonement logically leads to universalism. Arminians reject this notion, differentiating between Jesus' sacrifice for all (redemption accomplished) and the personal acceptance of that sacrifice (redemption applied).

7.4 How does God draw us?

The debate raises the question: Does God draw us by sovereign command or loving persuasion (or both)? The Bible everywhere declares that God is reaching out to us to bring us to Himself. He pursues us relentlessly so that, if we are seeking God, it is only because He is first seeking us, and the good news is that if we seek Him, we will find Him (Jer 29:13; Acts 17:27).

Other factors fill in the detail for us:
According to Christian teaching, humans are made in God's image, having a moral compass, an awareness of God, and the ability to recognize His handiwork in nature and conscience. However, God's clearest revelation comes through the preaching of the gospel which is a call to all of humanity to place their trust in Christ. At some point, in the case of the elect, this general call becomes effectual, leading to regeneration.

One thing to keep in mind is that Calvinism also acknowledges some kind of prevenient grace. The dramatic change that takes place at conversion is the focal point of Irresistible Grace. This change, though, does not typically appear out of nowhere. The chosen sinner usually has some understanding of the gospel and awareness of some level of need. Rather than an abrupt leap from darkness to light, the journey often involves periods of doubt and resistance, as well as moments of clarity and conviction, often taking place over months or even years.

7.5 Understanding faith

We all exercise faith every day. Our level of trust in certain individuals varies according to our past interactions with them. We rely on friends or colleagues at work, sit on chairs or travel on buses assuming they will function as designed. In the context of salvation, the crucial question is: Can we trust God? The remainder of this chapter explores the function of faith in the salvation process.

Beliefs are only one aspect of faith. Saving faith comprises three vital elements. First, it requires *knowledge* — of God, our inherent sinfulness, and the redemptive work of Christ. This knowledge, however, is not enough on its own. It must be accompanied by *assent* to the truth of these facts together with a firm belief that God will indeed forgive our sins as he promises. Finally, faith culminates in *trust*, where we rely entirely on Christ alone for salvation, placing our hope and future in His hands.

Three crucial and contentious questions are at the heart of the debate around the nature of faith:

First, is faith something we possess within ourselves, or is it a gift given by God? Calvinists assert that faith must be a gift from God[80] because humans are inherently incapable of believing in God on their own.

[80] " God does not do the believing for us. It is our own faith but it does not originate with us. It is given to us. It is a gift of sheer grace". Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, p119

Salvation, they say, would be in jeopardy if it were contingent on people's free will to believe. Arminians, on the other hand, while agreeing that humans are unable to believe on their own, argue that God graciously enables faith[81], making it possible for all to respond to His call. Assuming God has extended His grace, the biblical exhortations to trust and believe imply that it is within human capability to do so.

Second, if faith is necessary for salvation, should it not be considered a "work"? Calvinists often criticize Arminianism for being too man-centred, suggesting that if salvation hinges on human faith, then faith becomes a work[82]—an excuse for boasting. In response, Arminians point out that the Bible defines a work as an activity undertaken to receive something in return. Since saving faith does not seek any reward but is simply the acceptance of God's grace, it cannot be classified as a work. Also, the New Testament consistently portrays faith and works as mutually exclusive; therefore, faith that leads to salvation cannot be a work[83]. Faith, according to Arminians, is like receiving an inheritance. One does not earn an inheritance; it is accepted gratefully, without any claim of having earned it.

Calvinists often accuse Arminians of promoting a synergistic view of salvation, similar to that of Catholicism or Semi-Pelagianism, where Christ's work on the cross is incomplete without the sinner's response of faith. Arminians, however, claim this misrepresents their position. The reasons why some people respond positively to the Holy Spirit's prompting and others resist, remain a mystery, but this does not mean that it is in any way meritorious.

Finally: Which comes first—faith or regeneration? Is it faith, defined as the commitment of the human heart to trust in Christ alone for salvation, or regeneration, the transformative work of the Holy Spirit that makes a sinner a new creation in Christ?

It is a key principle of Calvinism that regeneration precedes faith[84] but it gives rise to a problem relating to the time interval between regeneration and faith. Some Calvinists think there could be a period of months or even years between a person being regenerated and subsequently coming to faith in Christ. In this interim period what we have is a regenerate unbeliever, which begs the question "is there any need for

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[81] (We) "do not hold that those who apply to themselves virtue of Christ's death, do this of themselves; rather, they do it only because the Spirit of God supernaturally induces them to do so. Nor do we hold that any but the elect will actually avail themselves of a salvation that is applicable to all. What we do hold is that God shows himself generous to all whether they respond to his kindness or not. His leaving the door open to all does not result in the salvation of one extra soul".
Douty, Norman: Did Christ die only for the elect?, Wipf and Stock Publishers, p41.

[82] ""Arminianism in effect turned faith into a meritorious work." Packer, J.I. in foreword to Owen's "Death of death".

"Arminianism is not an evangelical option. It is a return to Rome."
MacArthur, John. The God Who Loves (Word Publishing, 2001).

[83] "Salvation is all of God, we cannot merit it; but in the preaching of the gospel, we are challenged to use our God-given capacity to trust Christ to receive it. That trust is called "faith", and it is, according to Paul, the opposite of works.
Lennox, John C. Determined to Believe? Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition. p53

[84] "A cardinal point of Reformed theology is the maxim: "Regeneration precedes faith. We do not believe in order to be born again; we are born again in order that we may believe". Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, p72

"Faith is the evidence of new birth, not the cause of it." John Piper, Desiring God.

faith”[85]? Recognising this difficulty, progressive Calvinism proposes that the sequence is not temporal but logical. At the point of conversion, regeneration and faith happen simultaneously, and in that same moment those who put their faith in Christ are instantly Justified, reconciled, redeemed and adopted into God’s family. Everything occurs at once.

Arminians, however, maintain that faith comes first, acting as both a logical and temporal prerequisite for regeneration. They note that while the Bible may not explicitly state that regeneration follows faith, in many places it states that the blessings of salvation are the result of faith. For Arminians, regeneration follows faith immediately, without any time gap. They contend that hearing God's Word (as stated in Romans 10:17) is the source of faith, rather than regeneration, and that there is no time lag between the two.

Back to our diagram

<table>
<tr><th>Hyper Calvinism</th><th>Moderate Calvinism</th><th>4 Point Calvinism</th><th>Classical Arminianism</th><th>Semi - Pelagianism</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">No free will</td><td colspan="2">Compatibilistic freedom</td><td colspan="2">Free to choose otherwise</td></tr>
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<tr><td colspan="3">God’s grace cannot be resisted</td><td colspan="2">Grace can be accepted or rejected</td><td>Grace alone not sufficient</td></tr>
</table>

Now it’s your turn

As you wrap up this chapter, engage with the Bible passages in Appendix A. Ask yourself: How might a Calvinist and an Arminian interpret these verses differently, and why?

Does the weight of biblical evidence point us unambiguously to the Calvinist or Arminian position – or to some other conclusion?

[85] “If regeneration precedes faith, a serious logical problem confronts us. If a person is regenerate by an act of God, are they not therefore a member of the kingdom of heaven and already in receipt of salvation? What then would be the point and purpose of subsequent repentance and faith?”

Lennox John C. Determined to Believe? (p. 154). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition

What's the point?
It's not about:

- Whether humans have the ability in themselves to exercise faith in Christ. They don't.
- Whether humans can draw near to God apart from His grace. They can't
- Whether the elect can resist the grace of God. They can, and do, up to the point of regeneration.
- Whether the non-elect can be drawn by God. They can, and are, but only under the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The discussion boils down to the question "Is the grace of God resistible or non-resistible?" with the corollary "Which comes first – faith or regeneration?", with maybe a further question "Does it matter, if both happen simultaneously"?

From doctrine to devotion
Paul Tripp says of grace "You need it. You can't live without it but you can't purchase it and you can't earn it. It only ever comes as a gift. God's grace is the most powerful force in the universe… It reaches you where you are and takes you where He wants you to be. It has the power to do something that nothing else can do: transform … your heart".

As we reflect on the doctrine of Irresistible Grace, we find ourselves seeking to understand the mystery of God's saving work in human hearts. Whether we see grace as irresistible or as a powerful yet resistible invitation, we can all agree that it is by grace we are saved—not by our own strength, wisdom, or effort.

Consider for a moment the magnitude of this truth. Before we ever thought to look for God, He was already seeking us. Before we felt the first stirring of spiritual hunger, He was preparing the feast. Every morning we wake to new mercies, not because we have earned them, but because grace provides them. Every moment of spiritual insight, every stirring of holy desire, every impulse toward righteousness – these are evidence of divine grace actively operating in our lives. Whether this grace is irresistible or enabling, it is always, invariably, amazing.

Grace, in all its forms, is deeply personal. It meets us where we are—in our weakness, in our brokenness, and in our inability to reach God by our own strength. We can be assured that God is not distant, waiting for us to measure up.

At the heart of this relationship lies faith—the channel through which grace is received. From the Calvinist perspective, faith is a gracious gift, given by God and sustained by Him. In the Arminian view, faith represents the free response of the individual to God's prevenient grace. Yet, in both cases, faith serves as the bridge between the divine initiative and the human heart. Faith is not something we achieve on our own but is made possible by the grace that enables us to believe and trust in God.

As we close this study, let us remember that the ultimate purpose of understanding grace is not to win theological arguments but to draw closer to the God who gives it.

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Chapter 8 Perseverance of the saints

Once Saved, Always Saved – or – Can true believers fall away from grace?

8.1 Setting the Scene

The doctrine of eternal security, often encapsulated in the phrase "Once Saved Always Saved," has long been the subject of heated debate. On one side, Calvinists affirm that the elect are kept secure by God's power, so cannot fall away completely or finally from the state of grace. On the other, Arminians contend that believers must actively maintain their position in God's love, otherwise they risk losing their salvation.

8.2 The Calvinist Perspective

According to this view, those who truly belong to God cannot completely fall from grace[86]. Central to this doctrine are two related concepts: preservation and perseverance. Preservation means that God's sovereign will ensures the believer's eternally security —once God has set His love upon an individual, that person's eternal destiny is irrevocably sealed. This is not just a hopeful expectation but an absolute certainty based on God's unchanging purposes, Christ's efficacious work, and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit.

Perseverance[87], on the other hand, acknowledges human frailty and the possibility of temporary lapses into sin. It contends, however, that true believers will, by the ongoing sanctifying work of the Spirit, be restored to the path of righteousness. The Calvinist is confident that the elect will not ultimately fail to reach the finish line of their salvation.

This doctrine finds its support in key scriptural texts such as John 10:28, where Jesus promises that His sheep will never perish, and Romans 8:29-30, which outlines the golden chain of salvation from predestination to glorification. Philippians 1:6 assures believers that the good work begun in them will be brought to completion, while Jude 24-25 extols God's ability to keep them from falling.

The theological underpinnings of this doctrine rest upon the character of God—His omnipotence, omniscience, and faithfulness. The eternal nature of the gift bestowed upon believers—eternal life, eternal redemption, and eternal salvation—further reinforces the Calvinist claim. Moreover, the new nature imparted to believers through the indwelling Holy Spirit ensures that they cannot continue indefinitely in sin; the Spirit's work in them guarantees ultimate victory over the world and sin[88].

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[86] "They whom God hath accepted in his beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainty persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved"

Westminster Confession of Faith, (17.1).

[87] "Perseverance is not an activity of the human person but a gift from God. Among the Reformed the doctrine of perseverance is seen as a gift of God who assures that the work of grace is continued and completed …

Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged, ed. John Bolt (Baker Academic), p584.

[88] "The perseverance of the saints is not the guarantee of perfection, but rather that God will keep us fighting the fight of faith so that we hate our sin and never make any lasting peace with it".

Piper, John. Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God (Christian Focus, 2013), p68.

8.3 The Arminian Perspective

Arminians contend that the promises of eternal salvation are conditional on continued faith. The possibility of apostasy looms large in their theology, as they argue that just as an individual can resist God's grace at the outset, they can also abandon it after initially embracing it[89].

Arminians point to the many scriptural warnings against apostasy and the necessity of perseverance. The New Testament is full of admonitions to remain steadfast in the faith, as well as cautionary examples of those who have fallen away[90]. Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-31 are often cited as sombre reminders that it is possible to taste the heavenly gift and yet later reject it.

Theologically, Arminians argue that salvation is not just a one-time decision but a lifelong journey of faith. To them, the Calvinist position risks giving believers a false sense of security, potentially leading to complacency or even a licence to sin. Instead, Arminians believe that the possibility of falling away is a powerful motivator for disciplined and vigilant living, urging believers to remain faithful and heed the warning passages found throughout the New Testament.

In response, Calvinists maintain that the warnings serve a pastoral purpose—they are means by which God ensures the perseverance of His saints, not indications of a real possibility that the elect might lose their salvation. They argue that salvation, which includes regeneration and justification, is an irreversible act of God that necessarily leads to sanctification. Thus, while believers may struggle with sin, they are no longer under its dominion (Romans 6:14), and the transformative power of the new birth ensures that they cannot continue in sin (1 John 3:9).

We can add this information to our diagram:

<table>
<tr><th>Hyper Calvinism</th><th>Moderate Calvinism</th><th>4 Point Calvinism</th><th>Classical Arminianism</th><th>Semi - Pelagianism</th></tr>
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<tr><td colspan="3">Salvation cannot be lost</td><td colspan="2">Salvation can be lost</td></tr>
</table>

[89] "A regenerate man may fall not only partially, but finally, from grace … and that consequently he may perish eternally."
Watson, Richard. Theological Institutes, Vol. 2, p. 450.

We may depart from God, and if we do, we shall perish everlastingly. Salvation, though received by faith, may be lost by sin."
Thomas O. Summers, Systematic Theology, p. 351.

[90] "The possibility of falling from grace is written in the most legible and awful characters on every page of the New Testament."
Pope, William, B. A Compendium of Christian Theology, Vol. 2, p. 459.

8.4 Exploring the warning passages

An extended list of warning passages is provided in Appendix A.

Calvinist seek to explain these passages in the following ways. They are often addressed to communities under threat from false teachers whose primary goal is to deceive believers. In the light of these deceptions, the NT writers exhort the believers to persevere in the faith. The NT also distinguishes between superficial faith and genuine saving faith. Jesus' parables, such as those of the ten virgins and the wheat and tares, demonstrate that true and false disciples exist in the visible church. According to 1 John 2:19, the presence of apostasy may not indicate that salvation has been lost, but rather that it was never truly possessed in the first place. "They went out from us, but they were not of us."

Nonetheless, these passages should not be dismissed too lightly. They are reminders to all professing Christians to examine themselves, as Paul urges in 2 Corinthians 13:5, to ensure that they are indeed in the faith. The warnings serve to awaken the conscience and increase spiritual vigilance, driving believers to cling more tightly to Christ[91].

8.5 Pastoral implications

The reality of sin in the believer's life is an unavoidable aspect of Christian experience. Yet, Calvinists offer hope in the assurance that God's grace is sufficient not only to forgive but also to restore those who truly repent. The ongoing process of sanctification is seen as evidence of God's continued presence and activity in the believer's life, preventing them from persisting in sin.

There is also the issue of spiritual coldness, addressed in Revelation 2:4, where believers are cautioned not to lose their first love. The example of Lot, a righteous man who sinned grievously by becoming entangled in worldly affairs is a reminder that the bonds of grace cannot be severed.

The danger of "easy believism" must also be addressed[92]. The modern tendency to reduce faith to mere intellectual assent validated by a simple prayer, devoid of genuine repentance and discipleship, is rightly seen as a distortion of the gospel. True saving faith is transformative, producing a life marked by obedience, love for God, and a desire for holiness. This has significant implications for preaching and pastoral care.

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[91] "There is no good reason for doubting that the biblical writers believed that a genuine Christian believer could fall away and perish eternally. The warnings are addressed to genuine believers and are given as a means of preventing such a tragedy."
Marshall, I, Howard. Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away, p. 210

"The warning passages are not merely hypothetical but are meant to impress upon believers the genuine danger of falling away and the need for continual faith and obedience. The fact that such warnings exist means there is something to be genuinely feared." Picirilli, Robert E. Grace, Faith, Free Will, 9Randall House Publications), p. 206

[92] "The gospel preached and the doctrine of salvation taught in most evangelical pulpits and lecterns, and believed in most evangelical pews, is not classical Arminianism but semi - Pelagianism if not outright Pelagianism. Today, semi - Pelagianism is the default theology of most American evangelical Christians".
Olson, Roger E. Arminian Theology (p. 30). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition

Understanding apostasy

The concept of apostasy, understood by Arminians as the deliberate rejection of previously held faith, is viewed as a grave danger, that underscores the seriousness of the Christian life and the necessity of perseverance.[93] While some Arminians hold that final apostasy is irreversible, others maintain that repentance can restore even the worst sinner, affirming that while one may fall from grace, they cannot fall beyond it. Calvinists claim that true believers cannot finally fall away and lose their salvation[94].

The unforgivable sin, described by Jesus as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, is not a fleeting doubt or a single act, but rather a persistent and wilful rejection of the Holy Spirit's work. It stands as a solemn warning against the dangers of hardening one's heart to the point of no return.

Assurance

The apostle John wrote his first epistle, "that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13), offering believers a foundation of certainty. This assurance is not presumptuous but grounded in the unchanging character of God and His covenant promises (1 John 2:25).

Yet, the struggle with doubt is not uncommon. Arminians often grapple with the challenge of maintaining their faith, while Calvinists may wrestle with the question of whether they are truly among the elect. Historical figures like John Bunyan and many Puritans were famously plagued by such doubts, fearing that some future sin might reveal them as reprobate rather than elect.

Assurance[95] is cultivated through faith disciplines such as regular engagement with Scripture, prayer, and the and the other means of grace. The Holy Spirit's testimony within the believer, known as the Spirit of

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[93]"The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints… is contradicted by the numerous warnings given to believers themselves against apostasy. If there be no possibility of falling, these cautions are meaningless."

Watson, Richard. Theological Institutes, Vol. 2, p. 450

"It is most evident that a person truly regenerated may so apostatize as to perish everlastingly… The Apostle [in Hebrews 6:4-6] is describing real Christians, not mere pretenders, and showing that it is possible for them to fall away."

Summers, Thomas. O. Systematic Theology, p. 317.

[94] "The saints can never fall from a state of true and saving grace. They may fall into grievous sins, but not totally nor finally, so as to perish eternally… For if the purpose of God according to election is immutable, it cannot be that those whom He has elected should not be saved." Turretin, Francis, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 2, Topic 15, Question 18.

"They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 17.1.

[95] "It is possible for believers to obtain assurance of their salvation, and they ought to strive for it; but this assurance does not arise from a knowledge of their predestination to life, but from a consciousness of true faith and from the testimony of the Holy Spirit." Arminius, J. Works of James Arminius, Vol. 1, Oration IV

"The foundation of our assurance is not in ourselves, but in the promise of God, which is in Christ, and the efficacy of His intercession. Therefore, our assurance must stand or fall with the faithfulness of God and the merit of Christ."

Owen, John. The Works of John Owen, Volume 6, "The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed"

Sonship, provides an internal witness to their adoption into God's family. This assurance, coupled with the visible fruit of Christian virtues, serves as both evidence and confirmation of one's place among the elect.

Now it's your turn

Ready to flex your Bible muscles one last time? Take a look at Appendix A and let Scripture guide you. Think of it as your workout for the week—no sweat, just some deep, rewarding reflection.

What's the point?

There are many points of difference in how Calvinists and Arminians explain perseverance, assurance, apostasy and the warnings, but the underlying issue is outlined in the questions below:

The Bible references in Section 8.2 clearly teach that salvation cannot be lost, while those in later sections seem to be equally clear that it can. How are we to understand what appears to be a serious contradiction? If equal weight is given to the two strands of teaching, do you think it is possible to arrive at a full explanation?

From doctrine to devotion

The study of perseverance emphasises the sustaining power of God's love for His people. Regardless of the theological details, both Calvinists and Arminians affirm that a believer's relationship with God is not self-made; it's a gift established and continually nurtured by His grace. The perseverance of the saints, at its heart, is a testament to God's enduring love and faithfulness. It assures us that our salvation is not dependent on our strength or ability to maintain it, but on God's steadfast promise.

The doctrine of perseverance is not just a theological concept to be debated; it is a deeply practical truth meant to inspire and comfort believers. It reminds us that our salvation is not ultimately dependent on the strength of our grip on Christ but on His mighty grip on us. The hands that were pierced for our sins will never let us go. Jesus Himself assures us, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28).

We are called to persevere, to continue, in the grace of God and God has promised to preserve us safe to the end. The Christian life is one of constant warfare and sometimes of defeat and failure. As Christians, we know we are far from perfect. Sin often overtakes us and in extreme cases we may find ourselves questioning whether we were ever truly saved or if we have lost our salvation. In such circumstances, we can turn confidently to our loving Father, knowing that He welcomes repentant hearts and restores His children.

The "warning passages" in Scripture serve as a sober reminder that our faith must be active and living. They encourage us to examine our hearts continually, to remain vigilant in our walk with Christ, and to avoid complacency. But we can be confident that the same God who predestined us in love has also committed to seeing us through to glory. Every step of our journey, every moment of doubt, and every season of struggle is held within the bounds of His sovereign grace.

As we run the race set before us, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He has walked this path before us, and He walks it with us still. His grace is sufficient for every challenge, and His love will sustain us to the end. Whatever lies ahead, we can take heart in this truth: He is faithful, and He will never leave or forsake His own.

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Chapter 9 Calvinism vs. Arminianism: A Personal Perspective

Knowing I have been looking at this subject for such a long time, many friends have asked what conclusions I have reached. Am I now Calvinist or Arminian? My response is that I find it very difficult to subscribe to either system. Both offer many valuable insights, but I also see instances where they obscure the broader scope of biblical teaching. Let me highlight three factors that I believe make it difficult to be dogmatic about claiming to have arrived at ultimate truth.

First, the subject matter itself, dealing with the attributes and intentions of Almighty God, is inherently beyond human comprehension. How can finite mortals ever fully comprehend the eternal counsels of God? Calvinism and Arminianism, at different points, both reach positions where seemingly contradictory truths cannot be logically reconciled. At these points we acknowledge the limitations of our finite minds, but appear less willing to accept the limits of our finite systems.

Second, the Bible itself does not attempt to systematise truth. Instead, it often places what appear to be opposing ideas in dynamic tension without seeking to resolve it. If the Bible presents such mysteries unapologetically, perhaps we should do the same, recognising that God's truth is beyond human categorisation.

Third, it appears to me that appeals to Scripture alone cannot prove one side right and the other wrong. Both sides use the same biblical passages but they reach different conclusions based on their interpretive frameworks. Scripture does not always provide explicit statements on every subject, so we must arrive at our conclusions based on logical deductions from the text, but the problem is that we don't all apply the same logic to the text.

Trying to organise scripture can be beneficial, but only up to a point. I recently came across this quote by C. H. Macintosh, which, although written many years ago, struck a chord with me: "We can no more systematise God's word than we can systemise God himself. His word, his heart and his nature are too deep and comprehensive to be included within the limits of the very brightest and best-constructed human system of theology ever framed. We shall ever be discovering passages of scripture which will not fall in with our system"[96].

While I have reservations about both Calvinism and Arminianism, I am profoundly grateful to the many writers and theologians on both sides who have enriched my faith. Calvinists like Louis Berkhof, A.W. Pink, Al Martin, and Wayne Grudem, alongside Arminians such as Henry Thiessen, Roger Olson, and Jack Cottrell, have all deepened my understanding of the gospel and challenged me to revisit Scripture with fresh eyes.

Shared foundations

It is a common misconception that Calvinism and Arminianism are diametrically opposed, with only one considered orthodox. The reality is that both are genuine attempts to understand the profound mysteries of God, and both affirm core doctrines such as the Trinity, the eternality of God, and the dual nature of

[96] Macintosh, miscellaneous writings, Severn, "one sided theology", pp12 – 16.

Christ. Both proclaim that salvation is by grace through faith and uphold the inerrancy of Scripture and the mandate to preach the gospel.

Despite their differences, neither system denies the other's faith or salvation. Equally godly Christians adhere to both frameworks, which are frequently misrepresented by their opponents. In general, however, most Calvinists affirm the sincerity of Arminians, and Arminians acknowledge the Calvinist commitment to evangelism and global missions. Such mutual respect is essential to promote unity within the larger body of Christ.

I felt compelled to provide the preceding rather lengthy background in order to pave the way for a more detailed explanation of my own position, which I offer with considerable trepidation. I am aware that my remarks here pale in comparison with the extensive, scholarly writings of those who have dedicated their entire lives to studying this branch of theology. However, the reader will understand that I make no claim that my view is the final, definitive word on this subject. It simply represents my current understanding—a snapshot on an ongoing journey, complete with its own limitations and ambiguities. I still have a way to go on this journey. Others will undoubtedly arrive at different conclusions from me, and I hope you find your journey as enjoyable as I found mine.

So, here goes

Sovereignty

The Bible clearly states that God is sovereign, ruling over everything with complete authority, sometimes by directly initiating human actions, sometimes allowing them, but always in control and always with the ultimate goal of achieving His plan. However, I must admit that I struggle with the concept of meticulous providence – the teaching that every thought, action and emotion is caused by God, so I feel more inclined to the limited sovereignty position. For me, scripture and human experience both depict a world where people make genuine free choices, whether for good or evil.

It appears to me that meticulous providence is not only contrary to Scripture (see Isaiah 30:1 and Jeremiah 32:35) but it also raises what I consider to be insurmountable theological concerns, such as the denial of human free will, and, more importantly, that God is the author of sin and evil. I know that those who believe in meticulous providence argue that God is not the author of sin. It is difficult to reconcile the idea that God determines every human action and yet is not in any way responsible for the world's evil.

At the same time, I reject hard libertarianism, which assumes total individual autonomy, because humans are not completely free to act independently of God or external influences. Free will exists, but it is not absolute. Every decision we make is set in a historical context which establishes the parameters and influences the outcome. Typically, we are presented with several options, but sometimes circumstances, personal limitations, or God's direct intervention leave us with only one. This reflects the soft libertarian position where some choices are truly free while others are predetermined by prior conditions.

Interestingly, this perspective Is, in some respects similar to compatibilism, the softer form of determinism. Compatibilism acknowledges a degree of human autonomy within God's overall sovereignty. Both soft

libertarianism and compatibilism agree that humans do have free will, which is ultimately subordinate to God's sovereignty.

Scripture affirms both determinism and libertarianism, often placing them side by side without apology, explanation, or any apparent need for reconciliation. If the Bible presents these apparently contradictory truths in this way, we must be prepared to do the same.

Total depravity

The doctrine of total depravity holds that sin has corrupted every part of our being, leaving us enslaved to its power. This explains why the world is as it is. It also means that humanity, without God's help, is utterly incapable of turning to Him. Calvinists and classical Arminians agree that humans cannot, will not, and do not seek God on their own.

That said, I find it disappointing that Calvinists routinely misrepresent Arminians, accusing them of denying total depravity in order to preserve human input to salvation. They portray Arminianism as teaching that God does 99% of the work, but sinners must provide the final 1%—faith. Calvinists believe that Arminians just cannot let God do everything. Arminians don't recognise this description of themselves. No Arminian claims to contribute to their salvation. Instead, they come to Christ confessing their sin, casting themselves entirely on the mercy of God, and believing His promise of forgiveness through Christ's atoning work.

Two questions have often intrigued me regarding the human condition and the process of salvation:

1. How do we account for the many examples of non-Christians who live exemplary lives?
2. How do sinners overcome their inability to respond to God's irresistible grace?

1. We all know non-Christians who live good, honest, and even sacrificial lives. Every Calvinist I've read turns immediately from describing the bleak picture of human sinfulness to "This does not mean that humans are as bad as they could be". The same human heart, capable of horrific evil can also produce acts of kindness, integrity, and creativity. But where did this goodness come from?

It clearly did not originate in the human heart which scripture describes as "desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9). There must be other factors in play. If left to ourselves, we can do nothing. But God has not left us to ourselves. He comes to us in grace which I see as a continuum:

Common Grace: God extends blessings universally
Revelatory Grace: God reveals Himself through creation and conscience
Preparatory Grace: Divine actions, such as contact with Christians or hearing the gospel preached that for some will lead on to saving and sanctifying grace.

These describe God's ongoing engagement with humanity and explain why it is not as bad as it could be.

2. Total depravity says we are dead in sins and as such we cannot, nor do we wish to, seek God (Eph 2:1; Rom 3:11). Romans 3:11 does say that no one seeks after God, regarding which Douglas Wilson says "…if the words in Romans 3 [vv.10-12] mean anything, not one unregenerate person has ever sought after

God—not one[97]". But there are about fifty verses in which people are commanded to seek God, with many containing the promise that when we seek Him, we will find Him (e.g., Jer. 29:13). Douglas Wilson's assertion is valid only if total depravity is considered in isolation. But the process of salvation is multifaceted. Humans cannot seek God by their own volition, but they can respond when He calls. As Jesus says, "The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). God initiates the call, enabling sinners to hear and respond. While some reject His call, others gratefully believe and are saved. Humans can seek God, when He extends enabling grace.

For Calvinists, Paul's statement in Romans 3:11 is the gold standard against which the other fifty or so verses are measured but it surely cannot be right to give more weight to one verse against so many others. Maybe it is as W.A. Butler says "We hold a few texts so near the eyes that they hide the rest of the Bible."[98] For me, it is imperative to keep the whole sweep of scripture in view. We must be very careful not to ignore those scriptures which don't quite fit into our system.

Unconditional election

The doctrines of foreknowledge, election, and predestination run throughout Scripture and have been a source of great encouragement to Christians for generations. I believe God's foreknowledge means He fully knows everything that will happen, including the fact that, on a specific August evening over sixty years ago, I would trust Christ as my Saviour. But after much study, I find no biblical support for the idea that God's foreknowledge of my decision was the reason He chose me for salvation. The Bible speaks of God choosing us, yet the Arminian claim—that God elects those He foresees will believe—seems to make our choice the foundation of salvation, rather than God's sovereign will.

So, on this point, I have to part company with Arminianism and say, with Calvinism, that I do not know why God should choose me, or anyone. But I'm glad He did, and I am content to leave the reasons with Him.

I wholeheartedly affirm the doctrines of election and predestination and rejoice in the benefits they bring. However, I strongly disagree with Calvinism's description and explanation of reprobation. I know there will be a final judgment and many will be condemned to eternal separation from God, but the idea that God created people for this purpose, or that He purposefully withheld the means of grace from them, seems to me to be without biblical foundation and so contrary to the God revealed by Jesus and the apostles.

It seems to me that God's love and wrath are most fully displayed in the cross. God's care for His creatures can be seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Nobody denies that. The cross also reveals God's holiness and wrath against sin. He does not need to set aside people from eternity for the express purpose of punishing them with everlasting torment so that He might be glorified by the display of all His attributes. For me, this idea contradicts the clear biblical teaching that God loves the world and desires that all should come to repentance.

So, I guess I must also part company from Calvinism on this particular point.

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[97] Douglas Wilson, in Back to Basics: Rediscovering the Richness of the Reformed Faith, D G. Hagopian, Ed. 26

[98] The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia: article on W.A. Butler, Vol II, p321.

Limited atonement

I became a Christian from a non-church background, knowing almost nothing about the Bible. My first encounter with the gospel was in a little gospel hall where I first learnt that Christ died for everyone, that God wanted everyone to be saved and that He was willing to forgive anyone on the basis of simple faith in Christ. As a new believer, I read the Bible voraciously and the amazing message of God's love for the world and Christ's death for everyone stood out on every page.

Years later, I was introduced to a narrower version of the atonement—that Christ died exclusively for the elect, those whom God had chosen for salvation. According to this view, it had never been God's intention to save everyone. Wrestling with this concept was deeply unsettling, but it wasn't until I embarked on these studies that I began to grapple seriously with the theological and biblical arguments.

The result? My commitment to a general atonement has only been strengthened, and that for a number of reasons. First, it seems to me that the biblical basis for limited atonement is very flimsy, relying on selective texts rather than the overarching witness of Scripture. Of course, Christ died for the "sheep" and the "church", but scripture also says God loves, and Christ died for the world. The consistent message of scripture presents Christ's death as sufficient and available to all who will believe.

Second, it casts a shadow over the character of God, who, the Bible says, loves the world, wants everyone to be saved and invites everyone to come to Him, yet limited atonement asserts that salvation was provided only for a select few. If this were to happen in a human context, we would question the sincerity of such an invitation.

Third, limited atonement necessitates a complex hermeneutical framework which frequently appears to contradict the natural reading of Scripture. This entails reinterpreting numerous texts that clearly express God's universal salvific will. Then there's the systematic redefinition of words such as "world", "all" and "whosoever" to refer exclusively to the elect, which appears more driven by theological presupposition than textual exegesis.

It is difficult to understand why God would express His love for the entire world so clearly and so frequently, if He really was speaking of His love only for the elect. Calvinists also like to point out that Arminians believe Christ died to make salvation possible whereas they believe that Christ's death actually secured the salvation of the elect. I'm not sure what they mean by this, presumably that Christ's death guarantees salvation for the elect for, even in Calvinism, the benefits of Christ's atonement are only applied when the elect individual places faith in Christ. This seems to me to be no different from the non-Calvinist view of redemption accomplished and applied.

A revealing insight into the Calvinist approach to scripture came to me while listening to a series of lectures by a well- known Calvinist whose ministry has been a great help to me over many years. He admitted that debates on limited atonement often reduce to throwing proof texts at each other. So, before he would debate with anyone, he would first seek to establish some theological principles such as the covenant of redemption, the priestly work of Christ, and the interconnectedness of unconditional election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace. Only after this foundation was laid could discussion on the atonement be productive.

This acknowledgement inadvertently highlighted two crucial weaknesses in his position: First, it calls into question the claim that Calvinism is derived from Scripture alone. Second, it demonstrates that limited atonement is not a self-evident biblical concept but rather one which requires an elaborate theological framework for support.

In contrast, I find myself drawn back to the simplicity of the message which first led me to faith: that God loves everyone and Christ died for everyone so that if anyone, under conviction by the Holy Spirit, believes in Christ, they will be saved. I think this is the view that an ordinary Christian, reading the Bible and taking the straightforward meaning of the text, would arrive at. For me, this remains the most compelling and biblically faithful understanding of the atonement.

Irresistible grace

Salvation is, at its core, all about grace. On this point, both Calvinists and Arminians agree: God does everything necessary to draw sinners to Himself. Also, both agree that every sinner—elect or non-elect—resists God's gracious invitations up to the moment of conversion. For Calvinists, this is the point at which the Holy Spirit decisively overcomes the resistance of the elect, regenerates their hearts, and grants them the faith to believe. Arminians, however, maintain that while the Holy Spirit draws all sinners, individuals may, even up to the point of conversion, choose to reject God's offer of salvation.

A common critique from Calvinists against Arminian theology is that it makes faith a "work" that saves, as if it were a human contribution that nullifies grace. Frankly, I think this is a nonsensical argument. First, the Bible constantly contrasts faith with works underscoring that faith alone saves and works cannot. If Arminian "faith" is a work, then salvation is impossible for non-Calvinists, a position few Calvinists would endorse. Second, consider the countless testimonies of Christians who, realising their sin and desperate need, reached out in faith to Jesus. I have never heard one of them, in their newfound joy, claiming they had "contributed" to their salvation. Faith is not a work; it is the hand that receives God's gift.

Then there's the question of which comes first: regeneration or faith. Calvinists historically argued for a chronological sequence, in which regeneration could precede faith by months or even years. This led to the awkward notion of "regenerated unbelievers" which is difficult to reconcile with Scripture or personal experience. More recently, the argument has shifted to one of logical, rather than temporal, priority: regeneration and faith occur simultaneously, but regeneration is logically prior. While this solution avoids the peculiarities of its predecessor, it's worth pausing to appreciate the irony of finite beings debating the logical order of simultaneous events in the mind of the eternal God.

Rather than getting bogged down in the details of sequences and priorities, I find it more helpful to think of salvation as a tapestry of divine grace, woven together by distinct but complementary acts of God. These acts unfold in three broad movements:

1. The Lead-Up to Conversion

Before the critical moment of salvation, God works sovereignly to prepare the way:

- God the Father elects and predestines according to His eternal purposes.

- God the Son offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice to atone for sin and satisfy divine justice.
- God the Holy Spirit draws sinners, convicts them of sin, and awakens their need for a Saviour.

2. The Moment of Conversion
In the miraculous instant of salvation, God's grace converges in a unified act of transformation:

- The Spirit of God regenerates, indwells, seals, and initiates the process of sanctification.
- The Lord Jesus Christ unites believers to Himself and redeems them through His atonement.
- God the Father declares the believer justified, reconciled, forgiven and adopted into His family.
- The repentant sinner responds in faith and repentance, turns from sin and begins to live out their new nature in Christ.

3. The Follow-Through from Conversion
Salvation doesn't end at conversion; it continues as God's purposes unfold in the life of the believer.

- God the Father preserves believers in the faith and ensures their ultimate glorification.
- God the Son intercedes as our High Priest at the Father's right hand.
- God the Holy Spirit guides, empowers, and assures believers of their salvation.
- In the journey of faith, the believer grows in sanctification, learns obedience and strives to be more like Christ.

When we step back and take in this panorama of grace, the debates and systems that once seemed all-important take on a new perspective. They have value, certainly, in helping us think through the mechanics of salvation. But ultimately, they pale in comparison to the breath-taking beauty of what God has accomplished. At the heart of it all is an unfathomable love and grace, emanating from a sovereign God who orchestrates every detail for His glory and our benefit.

The perseverance of the saints
A brief examination of the biblical references in Appendix A reveals a wealth of evidence supporting the Calvinist belief that a true Christian can never be lost. Because salvation is entirely the work of God, He will protect us throughout our lives and bring us safely into glory. This is my own position and if I had to choose one verse to hold on to, it would be Romans 5:10 "If, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, how much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life".

Strangely, when we examine the evidence again in Appendix A, we find a similar number of warnings about the danger of falling away. For much of my life, my approach has been to give greater weight to the security verses and explain away the other "awkward" passages. Arminians, I suspect, will do the same in reverse. However, it cannot be a good interpretive principle to accept one set of biblical evidence and dismiss others. If the Bible gives equal weight to two aspects of truth, we have to seek a deeper understanding while holding both sets in creative tension.

Interestingly, Jacob Arminius himself voiced uncertainty about his position on eternal security. He seemed torn between the weight of the warning passages and the assurance of God's grace. It is, in some ways, encouraging that even the greatest minds wrestle with same problems that we do.

In seeking a solution, I found Don Carson's perspective helpful. He reminds us that we will never fully comprehend the mysteries of God, who is both sovereign and personal, transcendent yet near, dwelling outside of time yet walking with us every moment of our lives. Whenever we seek to know more of God, we will almost certainly encounter tension and paradox. Carson develops this idea further by suggesting that assurance of salvation must include both preservation (God keeps us from falling, Jude 24) and perseverance (we are to keep ourselves in His love, Jude 21).

This insight brings us back to where we began with the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God has provided enough evidence for us to be confident He will keep us to the end, but that same evidence will not allow us to become complacent. The sovereign God has pledged to keep us believing, but He has also decreed the means by which He will accomplish this, which is for us to be constantly vigilant in working out our salvation. There are many warnings and exhortations to the effect that we have an active role to play in our sanctification.

Our task, then, is clear: we are to pursue holiness using every means at our disposal. Prayer, Scripture, fellowship, worship, and obedience are not optional extras; they are the channels through which God's sanctifying grace flows. This reality allows us to pursue holiness with diligence while resting confidently in God's preserving grace. Thus, the doctrine of perseverance emerges not as a theological puzzle to be solved but as a mystery to be lived. It calls us to rigorous spiritual engagement while reminding us that our security rests not in the perfection of our perseverance but in the faithfulness of God. We can rest in the confidence that whatever growth we may achieve, it was God's work in us. As Paul writes, "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure"

Journey's end

It's great to come home after a long journey. There's a real sense of relief and some joy that, at last, we have the opportunity to finally relax and do nothing for a while. I confess that I am experiencing something of that right now. We have spent considerable time together and, as your guide, I've tried to point out some key points of interest along the way. It's not possible to be completely objective but I have tried to be fair to both parties.

However, you now know where I stand at this stage of my journey. As I have said, I do not claim to have arrived at the final truth, nor have I sought to persuade readers to adopt my views. Instead, my aim has been to clarify Calvinist and Arminian beliefs, presenting their positions as fairly and objectively as possible. You must be the judge as to whether or not I have succeeded in this.

I recognize that many readers will disagree with my conclusions, remaining firmly committed to the Calvinism or Arminianism they have long embraced. Others may welcome the idea that the choice before us is not simply "Calvinism or Arminianism". Yet, the heart of this guide is not to compel alignment with either system or no system, but to encourage a deeper engagement with Scripture. Despite their differences, both traditions have helped countless believers grow closer to Christ over the centuries.

Theological differences are inevitable, but what matters most is our shared commitment to the core beliefs of the faith: the gospel of Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture, and our call to love God and our

neighbour. We must never forget that those with whom we disagree are not opponents to be defeated, but fellow pilgrims on this journey of faith. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ, equally loved by God and equally committed to understanding His truth. The differences, though significant, are not insurmountable obstacles to fellowship, worship, or shared mission.

In the end, it is not our grasp of doctrine that saves us, but the gracious hand of God holding us fast. Let that truth sustain us as we continue to walk with Him, seeking to know Him better and to make Him known.

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Appendix A Scripture references

Chapter 2 The Sovereignty of God

2.1 God at the centre

1 Chron 29:11 Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.

Ps 93:1 The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty

Rev 19:6 Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns!

See also: Ps 99:1, 103:19

2.3 How God works – His sovereignty and providence

In nature

Ps 135:6. Whatever the LORD pleases he does, in heaven and on earth …

Heb 1:3 Christ "upholds the universe by his word of power.

2 Pet 3:7 The heavens and earth that now exist are being *kept* until the day of judgment

See also: Neh 9:6; Col 1:17

In history

Job 12:23 Dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations

Ps. 22:28 He has determined the time of existence and the place of every nation on the earth,

Acts 17: 26 He made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation.

Our lives

Ps. 139: 15 All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Prov 16:9 A man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps"

Gal 1: 15 God had set me apart before I was born. Cf Jer 1: 5

See also: Ps. 139: 4; Job 14:5

2.2 – 2.3 Absolute Sovereignty

Is. 46:10 I say, 'My purpose will stand and I will do all that I please.'

Lam 3: 37-38 Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?

Eph 1: 11 (God) works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will

See also: Gen 50:20; Ps 75:7; Prov 16:4; Is 45: 7; Dan 4: 35; Amos 3: 6; Matt 19:26,

Various statements teach that God's control extends to the actions of people.

Ex 3:10 Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.

Ex 4:21 I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. (Plus 9 further refs in Exodus).

Ps 139:15 All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

See also: Josh 11:20; Prov 16:9; Ezek 3:8; John 12:40; Rom 9:18;

Even "random" occurrences fit into God's sovereign design.

2 Chron 18:33 Now a certain man drew a bow at random and struck the king of Israel. Cf verse 27.

Prov 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD"

2.4 – 2.5 Limited Sovereignty (self-limiting sovereignty)

The passages above clearly declare God's sovereignty, but there is another body of evidence showing that God does not always get what He wants:

1 People may refuse God's call

Is 65:12 I called but no one answered; I spoke but no one listened .. Cf Is 66:4

Matt 23:37; How often would I have gathered you …. But you were not willing … cf. Luke 13:34.

Luke 7:30 The Pharisees rejected the counsel of God

See also: John 5:40; Acts 7:51;

This leaves God's desire unfulfilled

Ezek 18:23, 32 I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord. Cf 33:11

1 Tim 2:4 God desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

2 Pet 3:9 God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance

2 God is profoundly saddened by His people's sinfulness but rejoices in their repentance and return.

Hos 11:8 How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?

Matt 23: 37 How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing

Luke 15:7 there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent

See also: Ps 81:11-14; Is 62:5; Jer 32:41; Lam 3:31-33; Zeph 3:17; 2 Pet 3:9

3 God changes His mind (repents) in response to His people's actions

Ex 32:9-14 But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God … Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Is 38:5 I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life

Jonah 3:10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

4 God is constantly reaching out to humans, calling them back to Himself

Is 5: 7 What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?

Is 65:2 All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people,

Jer 7:13 While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer

See also Jer 7:25; 25:4; 26:5; 29:19; 35:15

Chapter 3 The dark side of sovereignty

3.1 – 3 Do humans have free will?

Determinism is seen in such passages which suggest that God controls our thoughts, words, and actions:
Ps 139:15 All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.
Prov 16:9 The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.
Eph 1:11 God works everything according to the counsel of His will
See also: Prov 16:1, 19:21; Phil 2:13

Examples of control:
1 Chron 5:26 God stirred up the spirit of Pul, king of Assyria..., and he carried them away into exile".
Ezra 1:1 The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" *to allow God's people to return to their homeland to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple*.
See also 2 Chron 21:16; Ezra 6:22, 7:27; Hag1:14

Some passages bring determinism and libertarianism together:
Gen 50:20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.
Jud 14: 1-4 Samson sought a Philistine wife. "His parents did not know this was from the Lord".
Acts 4:27-28 Herod and (others) conspired against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.
See also: Gen 45:8; 1 Kings 12:15; Acts 2:23

The verses above show that God is in control of every situation and is working out His purposes according to His will. However, the Bible also makes plain that humans also have the ability to make free choices.
Is 30:1 Woe to the obstinate children, declares the Lord, who carry out plans that are not mine ….
Jer 32:35 They built high places for Baal … to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind—that they should do such a detestable thing.
Deut 30:11,19 It is not too difficult for you … I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." Cf Deut 11:26 -28

How free are we?

In the normal course of life people are free to make plans which may or may not materialise (1 Corinthians 16:7; Romans 16: 22, 23: James 4:15).
But, God sometimes intervenes to prevent, sometimes to permit and sometimes He intervenes directly to accomplish His purposes (Acts 8:26, 10:1 – 5, 12:1 – 10, 14:16).
Can we conclude that many of our decisions are free while others are determined?

Some passages show that people will be blessed or cursed depending on what they choose to do.
Is 1: 18-20 Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD … if you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the fruit of the land; but, if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.
Is 65:12 When I called, you did not answer … you chose that in which I do not delight
See also: Josh 24:15; Is 55:1,2; Matt 11:28; Rev 22:17

God calls on people to obey, choose, and believe, which implies humans have the capacity to do so.
Acts 2:40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.

Acts 17:30 God now commands all men everywhere to repent. (25 calls for repentance in NT).
Rev 3: 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

God holds us accountable which requires that humans can choose to respond or not.
1 Cor. 3:13 … their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light ..
Rev. 20:13 … each person was judged according to what they had done.

There is another strand of teaching showing that people, of their own volition, cannot turn to God which suggests that there are some circumstances where humans cannot exercise freedom of choice.
John 6:44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them.
Rom 3:11-12 There is none who seeks after God … There is none who does good.
Rom 8:7-8 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.
1 Cor 2:14 The person without the Spirit cannot accept the things that come from the Spirit of God.

We move now to the second issue in this chapter – the problem of evil

3.4 – 6 Sovereignty and evil If God is sovereign where did evil come from?

The Bible affirms the absolute holiness and justice of God
Is 57: 15 He is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity whose name is Holy.
Hab 1: 13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.
James 1: 13 God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.
See also Gen 50:11; Ex 15:11; 1 Sam 2:2; Hos 11:9; Acts 2:23; Rev 4:8, 15:3-4

Yet some passages suggest that God is, in some way, responsible for evil
Is 45: 7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster.
Amos 3:6 If disaster comes to a city, the LORD has done it.
Acts 2:23 Jesus was delivered up by the definite plan and purpose of God.
Eph 1:11 God works all things according to the counsel of His will.
See also: 1 Kings 22: 19-23; Job 1:12, 2:6; 2 Thess 2:11

Other passages picture God inciting men to sinful actions and attitudes.
Ex 10:20 The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart
1 Sam 16:14 "Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him". See also 1 Sam 18: 10ff; 1 Sam. 19:9ff.
2 Thess 2:11 God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie

Some passages attribute the existence of evil to Satan. Passages like Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-17 are often interpreted as describing the pride and fall of Satan, who was cast out of heaven for seeking to usurp God's glory. Other verses include:
John 8:44 The devil is "a murderer from the beginning" and "the father of lies,"
1 John 3:8 The devil has been sinning from the beginning.

Yet other passages attribute responsibility for sin to humans:
Gen 3:1-7 Eve ate the (forbidden) fruit, gave some to her husband and he ate
Rom 5:12 sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, so death spread to all men
James 1:13 God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

Finally, several passages indicate that evil actions are always under the control of God

Gen 50:20 You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.

Ex 9:16 God said to Pharaoh "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

Job 1:12 God said to Satan "all that he has is in your power, only do not … Cf 2:6

Chapter 4 Total Depravity

Are we fundamentally good, or is our nature entirely corrupt?

4.1 How the Bible views human nature

It declares that sin affects our whole being:

Its nature

Jer. 17:9 The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick. Who can understand it?

John 3: 19 Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

Rom 8: 6 – 8 The mind of the flesh is death…..is enmity against God, is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

See also: Gen 6:5; Mark 7:21-23

The fall affected every aspect of our being: the mind (Rom 3: 11); the will (2 Pet 2: 19); and affections (Is 57: 21; Titus 3: 3; 1 Pet 2: 11). Scriptures portray humans as morally evil (Matt 7: 11, 21 - 23; 12: 34; John 3: 19), spiritually sick (Is 1: 16; Matt 9: 12), and spiritually blind (Matt 4: 16; 1 Cor 2: 14; 2 Cor 4: 4).

Its universality

Rom. 3:10-12 There is none righteous, not even one.

Rom 3: 23 All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Its consequences

John 8: 34 Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.

Rom 6: 23 The wages of sin is death.

Eph 2; 3 dead in trespasses and sins…. and were by nature children of wrath.

See also Rom 6:6; 1 Cor 1:18; Eph 4:17 – 19; 2 Thess 1: 8, 9; Rev 20: 14, 15

The lost are in bondage to sin (John 8: 34; Rom 6: 6) and under the sentence of death: physical (Rom 5:12; 1Cor 15:22), spiritual (Eph 2: 3; 5: 14), and eternal (Rom 6: 23; Rev 21: 8).

Why are we not as sinful as we could be?

The image of God in us has been marred but not lost

Gen 9:6 Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood will be shed; for in the image of God He made man.

Jas 3:9 With our tongue we bless God and curse men, who were made in the image of God.

Ps 8:4, 5 What is man that you are mindful of him … you crowned him with glory and honour.

God reveals Himself in creation and conscience, and by the power of the Holy Spirit:

Rom 1: 20 The invisible attributes of God are clearly seen…… so that they are without excuse.

Eccl 3: God has set eternity in our hearts.

John 16: 8 He will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgement.

See also: Acts 17:27; Rom 2:4

4.2 The Calvinist view of Total Depravity and salvation

Unable to save ourselves

Rom. 3:11-12 ……. There is none who seeks for God; There is none who does good, not even one.
Rom. 8: 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please.
Eph 2: 1 You were dead in your trespasses and sins.
John 6: 44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.
1 Cor 2:14 The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him; he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

4.3 The Arminian view of Total Depravity and salvation

Bible shows humans doing good, seeking God etc

Doing good:

Gen 26:10 One of us could have taken your wife and you would have brought guilt on us.
(Abimelech, with only creation and conscience as guides, had a high view of marriage)
Rom 2: 14 The gentiles, who don't have the law, do by nature the things contained in the law.
Luke 6: 33 Even sinners do good to those who do good to them.
Acts 10: 22 Cornelius, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among the Jews.

Seeking God:

Deut 4:29 If…you shall seek the LORD your God, you shall find him, if you seek him with all your heart.
2 Chron 15:2 If ye seek him, he will be found of you.
Jer 29:13 You shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.
Acts 17: 26,27 God has made the nations….. that they should seek the Lord…. and find Him.
See also: 2 Kings 10:29, 30; Is 7:16, 55:6; Amos 5:4, 6; Acts 15:17, 16: 14, 30, 31;

Deut 30:11 The command is not too difficult for you, nor is it far off.
Rom 10:8 The word is near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart (quoting Deut 30:14).

4.4 Discussion of issues raised

Can non-believers seek God?

Matt 15:22 A Canaanite woman called out "Have mercy on me, O Lord ….. "
John 3:2 Nicodemus came to Jesus by night …
John 12:21 Some Greeks said "Sirs, we want to see Jesus".
Acts 17:11 The Bereans searched the Scriptures daily to find out if these things were so.

Bible everywhere calls for response – implies we are able to respond

Choose:

Deut 30: 19 I have set before you life and death. Choose life, so that you and your children may live.
Josh 24: 15 Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house …..

Come:

Is 1: 18 "Come now, and let us reason together……." Says the LORD.
Matt 11:28 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
John 5: 40 yet you refuse to come to me to have life.
See also John 6:35, John 7:37

Similarly

Look: See: Num 21: 9; Is 45: 22

Call: See: Isaiah 55:6, 58:9; Isaiah 65:24; Jer 33:3; Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13.

Repent: See: Luke 5:32; Acts 2:38, 3: 19; Acts 5: 31, Acts 11:18, 17:30

Receive: See: Mark 4:20, 10:15: John 1:12, 4:45; Acts 2:41, 8:14; Col 2:6.

Even though humans are dead in sins and, of their own inclination, cannot and do not seek God, He still holds them accountable:

Matt 12: 36 For every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.

Rom 14: 12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

1 Pet 4: 5 They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

See also Eccl 3:15; 2 Thess 1:8,9; Heb 4:13, 9:27

In addition to the above commands and invitations many verses speak of people refusing to accept God's offer of mercy

Matt 23: O Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you…. but you were not willing

John 5: 40 "You refuse to come to me to have life"

Rom 10: 21 All day long I have stretched out my hand to a disobedient people

See also Matt 11:20; Luke 13: 3; 15:10

The Bible also speaks of God hardening hearts to prevent them doing what is right. Why would He do this if people are unable to respond to His message.

Ex 4:21 etc I will harden Pharaoh's heart….

Mark 4:11 Jesus spoke in parables to prevent understanding, "Lest they should turn and be forgiven".

Rom 11:7 "Israel was hardened lest they should see or hear….".

Chapter 5 Unconditional election

Is our fate pre-determined?

5.1 Foreknowledge

The NT makes only five references to God's foreknowledge:

Acts 2:23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

Rom 8:29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.

Rom 11:2 God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.

1 Pet 1:2 Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.

1 Pet 1: 20 Christ was foreordained (lit foreknown) before the foundation of the world

Note: Rom 8:29 and 1 Pet 1:2 show that election and predestination are based on God's foreknowledge.

Foreknowledge as prescience

There are many references in Scripture to God knowing things ahead of time:

Ps 139: 16 Your eyes saw my unformed frame and in your book all my days were written

Isa 42: 9 Behold, new things do I declare: before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Acts 15: 18 Known to God from eternity are all His works.

See also: Isa 46:9, 10; Acts 4:28, 17:26.

Foreknowledge as foreordination.

Foreknowledge also conveys the idea of God having a personal relationship with His people.

Amos 3: 2 You only have I known of all the families of the earth

Matt 7:23 Depart from me I never knew you

Rom 11:2 God has not cast away His people whom he foreknew

See also: 1 Cor 8:3; Gal 4:9; 2 Tim 2: 19

5.2 Election - Key Ideas

Deut 7: 6 – 8 The lord has chosen you, not because you were more in number…but because He loved you.

Rom 9:11 For *the children* not yet born….. , that the purpose of God according to election might stand.

2 Thess 2: 13 God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

See also: Rom 11:5, 28; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Peter 1:10

Chosen 1 Chr 16: 13; Pss 105: 6, 43; 106: 5; Isa 65: 22; Luke 18: 7; Col 3: 12; 1 Pet 2: 9)

Election to service

Ex 31:2-4 I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri …. to make artistic designs …

1 Sam 16:1 The Lord said to Samuel, … I have chosen one of his (Jesse's) sons to be king."

Luke 6:13 – "When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles."

See also: Gen 18:18,19; Ps 105:26; Acts 1:2, 24, 9:15.

Corporate election

Deut 14:2 You are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.

Eph 1:4-5 “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world” …
1 Pet 2:9-10 "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession
See also: Deut 7:7; Col 3:12;

Individual election

The Bible focusses on individual election, defined by Calvinists as unconditional, and by Arminians as conditional.

Unconditional election.

Acts 13: 48 And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.
Eph 1: 4,5 He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world …… [5] having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will,
2 Thess. 2:13 God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.
See also: John 1:13; Acts 4:28; Rom. 9:10-23; Eph 1: 11; 2 Tim 1:9; James 1:18.

Conditional election

Arminians would advance the same range of verses mentioned in the previous section. They say that these verses define election but not whether election is conditional or unconditional.

5.3 Predestination

Acts 2: 23 This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you,…
Eph 1:5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ …. ,
Eph 1:11 In Him we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose …..
See also: Rom 8:29,30; Acts 4:28, 10:42, 17:31; 1 Cor 2;7; Heb 4:7.

5.4 Reprobation

Matt 25: 41 Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels
Rom 9: 13 As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.”
Rom 9: 22 God ….endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.
I Thess. 5:9, For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation.
See also: Prov 16:4; Rom 11:7; 1 Pet 2:8; Jude 4

The non-Calvinist perspective

Arminians reject any idea that God selected specific people to be eternally damned. Damnation is the result of disobedience or refusal to accept the gospel offer.

Matt 5:22 Anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.
John 3:16 Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.
2 Pet 2:4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, …….
See also Matt 25:45; Rom 1:18, 6:23

Additionally non-Calvinists highlight the biblical teaching that God wants everyone to be saved and that the gospel invitation is extended to all.

Deut30:19 “I have set before you life and death … Now choose life, so that you may live.”
Ezek 18: 32 “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Therefore turn and live!”

1 Tim 2: 4. "[God] desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"
2 Pet 3: 9. "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance"
John 12: 32 "I will draw *all* men to myself, and John 16: 8. He will "convict the world".

Saviour of the world

John 4: 42 this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.
1 John 4: 14 we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son *as* Saviour of the world.
1 John 2: 2 He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world

Longsuffering

Ex 34:6 The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth,
Num 14:18 'The Lord is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression
Psalm 86:15 But You *are* a God full of compassion, gracious, longsuffering, abundant in mercy and truth.
See also: Rom 2:4, 9:22; 1 Tim 1:16; 2 Pet 3:9

The Bible presents God as expressing distress, grief, and even exasperation over unbelief, stiff-necked rebellion, and hardness of heart

Deut 9: 6 Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.
Isa 5: 3– 5 " What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?
Jer 7: 25 From the time your ancestors day after day I sent you my servants the prophets.
Matt 23: 37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, …, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

At times the Bible speaks of God rendering some persons incapable of understanding spiritual truth.

Isa 6: 9– 10 Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive. Quoted Matt 13: 13– 15; Mark 4: 12; Luke 8: 10; John 12: 37– 40; Acts 28: 25– 27.
Jer 5: 21 Hear this, you who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear
God hardens Pharaoh's heart (Exod 4: 21; 7: 3; 9: 12; 10: 1,20,27; 11: 10; 14: 4,8,17).

Chapter 6 Limited Atonement

Is Jesus' sacrifice for everyone or just a select few?

6.1,2 Concept of the atonement What is the significance of Jesus' death?

It was to deal with sin

1 Cor 15:3 Christ died for our sins
Heb 9:26 He appeared to do away with sin
1 Pet 2:24 He bore our sins in His own body on the tree
See also: John 1:29; Gal 1:3; 1 Pet 3:18; Heb 1:3, 2:17: 1 John 1:7.

It was for others. His death was vicarious.

Mark 10:45 I am come to give My life, a ransom for many
John 10:11 Good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep
1 Pet 3:18 Christ died for sins - just for unjust
See also: Rom 5:8; Gal 3:13; Heb 2:9

It was sacrificial

1 Cor 5:7 Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us
Heb 9:28 Christ was sacrificed once to take away sins
1 John 2:2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins
See also: Eph 5:2; 1 Pet 1:19; Heb 10:12; 1 John 4:10

It was 'once for all'

Rom 6:10 He died unto sin once for all
1 Pet 3:18 Christ died for sins once for all
Heb9:28 He was sacrificed once for all to take away sin

6.3. General atonement

Biblical evidence

God desires salvation of all

Matt 18:14 It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.
1 Tim 2:4 God our Saviour, desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
2 Pet 3:9 The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

God provided salvation for all

John 1: 29 Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world
2 Cor 5:19 God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ …
1 John 2:2 He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world
See also: Is 53:6; Luke 19:10; John 12:47; Rom 5:6,18; 1 Tim 2:6, 4:10; Tit 2:11; Heb 2:9

Offer of salvation is extended to all

Isaiah 55: 1 Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat.
Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.
Rev 22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.
See also: Is 45:22; Joel2:32; Matt 11:28.28:19; John 7:37; Acts 2:21; Rom 10:12

6.4. Limited atonement

Biblical evidence

Christ is regularly said to have died for particular groups or persons, with the clear implication that his death fully secured their salvation.

Matt 1: 21 He shall save His **people** from their sins
Matt 20:28 The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for **many**.
John 10:15 I lay down My life for the **sheep.**
Gal 2: 20 the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for **me**
Eph 5: 25 Christ also loved the **church** and gave Himself for her
Heb 9:28 So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many
See also: John 15:13; Acts 20:28; Rom 9:13; Heb 9:28

Jesus prayed only for those whom the Father had given him, not for the "world "
John 17 : 9 I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours.
John 17: 20 I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word

Additional support

Theological considerations

Luke 22:22, The Son of Man is going as it has been determined.
Heb. 10:5, 7, When He comes into the world, He says, 'Sacrifice and offering You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me.' Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do Your will, 0 God.

God succeeds in all He does

The Bible passages given under the sovereignty of God clearly indicate that God does whatever he wishes. However, there is another strand of biblical evidence that seems to say this is not the case:
Prov1:24-26 Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one ….
Is 5:4 What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Jer 7:13 While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer.
Matt 23: 37 How often I wanted to gather your children together … but you were unwilling
See also: Is 65:12, 66:4; Jer 25:4; John 5:39,40

What do the words mean?

The Bible clearly presents the death of Christ as being for "the world" and "all" but these words can have a variety of meanings depending on the context and need not necessarily mean every person in the world.

Matt 27:25 All the people said "His blood be on us and our children".
Mark 1:5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.
John 12:19 The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Look, the **world** has gone after Him!"
Rom 1:8 Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world".
See also: Acts 2:44, Acts 10:33, Acts 17:6

But there are many references where no restriction is demanded by the context, such as:
John 1: 29 Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the **world**!
Rom 3: 19 that every mouth may be stopped, and all the **world** may become guilty before God.
2 Cor 5: 19 God was in Christ reconciling the **world** to Himself.
1 John 2: 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole **world**.

1 John 5: 19 The whole **world** lies in the sway of the wicked one. Cf 1 John 2: 2
See also: John 4:42, Rom 3:9, 23, Rom 5:12, 1 Tim 2:5, 6, 1 Tim 4:10, Heb 2:9, 1 John 4:14

Does God desire the salvation of everyone?

2 Pet 3: 9. "The Lord is patient toward you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance"

1 Tim 2: 4. "[God] desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"

John 12: 32 "I will draw *all* men to myself, and John 16: 8. He will "convict the world"—not just the elect .

Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33;11; Jer. 48:31; Isa. 28:21. God does not wish the death of any.

Chapter 7 Irresistible Grace

The great banquet – can anyone come or is it by invitation only?

7.1 Understanding Grace

1. Salvation is by grace alone.

Rom 3:24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.
Rom 4:16 Therefore it (salvation) is of faith, that it might be by grace;
Eph 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

2. Salvation is not by works.

Rom 3:28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the works of the law.
2 Tim 1:9 Who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works …
Titus 3:5 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.
See also: Rom 11:6; Eph 2:8,9

3. Repentance is granted by the grace of God.

Acts 5:31 God has exalted Him to His right hand … to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.
Acts 11:18 they glorified God, saying, then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.
2 Tim 2:25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.
See also: Phil 2:13; Luke 5:32; Acts 20:21; Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 7:10; 2 Pet 3:9

Common Grace

This includes the natural blessings of sunshine and rain (Gen. 17:20 (comp. vs. 18); 39:5; Ps. 145:9,15,16; Matt. 5:44,45; Luke 6:35,36; Acts 14:16,17; I Tim. 4:10), and is extended to elect and non-elect.
God holds back His judgement on sin to give time for repentance (Gen. 17:20 (comp. vs. 18); 39:5; Ps. 145:9,15,16; Matt. 5:44,45; Luke 6:35,36; Acts 14:16,17; I Tim. 4:10).

7.2 Irresistible Grace The Calvinist position

Irresistible grace is the doctrine that God effectively calls and regenerates people thereby guaranteeing that each individual will respond in saving faith.

Verses used in support of the doctrine

John 1: 12–13 As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.
John 6:37 All those the Father gives me will come to me …
Acts 13:48 As many as were appointed to eternal life believed
See also: Deut 30:6; Is 55:11; Ezek 36:26, 27. John 3:5, 6:44, 45; Acts 16:14; James 1:18

7.3 Prevenient Grace The Arminian perspective

John 1:9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world
John 12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself
Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people

Arminians believe that grace is resistible

Matt 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together ….. but you would not"
John 5:40 you refuse to come to me that you may have life
Acts 7:51 you always resist the Holy Spirit

The Bible presents the offer of salvation as universal and genuine:

Isa 45:22 turn to me and be saved all you ends of the earth
Isa 55:1 come everyone who is thirsty…
2 Cor 5:19 God has reconciled the world to himself, therefore "be reconciled to God".
See also: Is 1:18; John 3:16–18

7.4 How does God draw us?

Humans retain the image of their Creator (although distorted by sin) and so have some consciousness of the divine.

Gen 5:3 When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image …
Gen 9:6 Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind
James 3:9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness

God reveals Himself in creation, conscience and grace

Psa 19:1–4 The heavens declare the glory of God.
John 1:9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.
Rom 2:15,16 The gentiles show the work of the law written on their hearts, their conscience …
See also: John 12:32,16:8; Rom 1:20;

God sends His servants to preach the gospel to the whole world.

Matt22:14 Many are called but few are chosen
Mark 16:15f Go …and preach the gospel to every creature, He who believes … shall be saved.
Luke 14:16f He sent his servants to say "come for all things are ready, and they began to make excuses.
Acts 1;8 You shall be my witnesses … to the ends of the earth.

Those who "hear", experience an inward working of the Holy Spirit which results in salvation.

Rom 8:30 Those He predestined, he called, justified, glorified
2 Thess 2:14 From the beginning, God chose you to salvation… to which He called you by the gospel
2 Tim 1:9 he has saved us and called us with a holy calling
See also: Rom 1:7, 11:29; 1 Cor 1: 23– 24,26; Phil 3: 14; Heb 3: 1; 2 Pet 1: 10.

7.5 Understanding faith

1 Is faith a gift?

The idea that faith is a gift is supported by such passages as:

Eph 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God
2 Pet 1:1 Simon Peter …. to those who have received a faith as precious as ours.
Acts 5:31 God has exalted Him to His right hand … to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.
See also: Acts 3:16; Acts 20:21; Rom 12:3;

2 Does everyone have the capacity to believe?

The NT attributes faith to the individual. It is the individual's faith that saves:

Luke 7:50 Your faith has saved you also 18: 42
1 Cor 15:17 if Christ has not risen, your faith is futile. You are still in your sins
Luke 22:32 I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail
See also: Matt 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; Mark 2:5; 5:34; 10:52; Luke 5:20; 8:48; 17:19

The NT also says that saving faith arises from the preached word:

Rom 10:17 faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God

Jas 1:18 of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth

1 Pet1:23 being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God

See also: Rom 10:13 – 17; 1 Cor 4:15

3 Is faith a work?

Calvinists say that if faith is a condition of salvation this implies faith is a work. I have not been able to find any scripture supporting this position, but many which state the opposite.

Rom 4:3-5 To one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

Gal 2:16 a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

Phil 3:9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.

See also: Rom 4:16, 10:3-6

4 Can grace be resisted?

Examples of resistible grace:

Is 65:2 I have stretched out my hand all day long to a rebellious people.

Matt 23:37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

John 5:40 You will not come to me that you might have life.

See also: Ps 81:13; Is 5:4, 30:15; Matt 11:21; Acts 7:51

Jer 7:13 I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer.

See also: 2 Chron 36: 15; Jer 7:25, 26:5,, 29:1911:7, 25:3, 4, 32:33, 35:14, 44:4

5 Which come first – faith or regeneration?

Many scriptures declare that a person is justified upon believing in Christ, not the other way around.

Luke 7:50 Your faith has saved you

John 20:31 these are written that you may believe and by believing you may have life in his name.

1 Cor 1:21 It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

See also: John 6:40; Acts 16:31; Rom 4:3, 10:9,17; Eph 1:12,13;

The benefits of salvation have been given to us by faith as a precondition

Justification

Acts 13:39 Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.

Rom 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we[a] have peace with God …

Gal 2:16 know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

Adopted as children of God by faith

John 1:12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God

Gal 3:26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith; heirs of God by faith

Gal 3:24 So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith …

Regeneration first

Support for this position is found in:

John 3:5 unless you are born again you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven
John 6:65 no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.
1 John 5:1 everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.
See also: John 6:37, 44; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Thess 3:2; 1 Tim 1:2

Chapter 8 Perseverance of the saints

Once Saved, Always Saved – or – Can true believers fall away from grace?

8.2 The Calvinist Perspective

Biblical support

John 6:39 This is the will of him who sent me that I lose none of those whom he has given me.
Rom 8:1 There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus
Phil 1: 6 God who began a good work will complete it
Jude 24 He is able to keep us from falling
See also: John 6:47, 10:28; Rom 8:29-30; 1 Thess 5:9; 2Thess 2:13; Heb 9:12, 10:14; Jude 24

Theological support

Christians are eternally secure because of the plan of God the Father

Dan 4:35 He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?
1 Pet 1:4 into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, which is kept in heaven for you …

Christians are eternally secure because of the provision of God the Son

John 5:24 He who believes in me has eternal life and shall not come into judgement ……..
Rom 8:34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us
Heb 5:9 Christ is the author of the eternal salvation to all obey him. (Compare 9: 12).
Heb 7:25 Therefore he is able to save completely[a] those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Christians are eternally secure because of the protection of God the Holy Spirit

John 14:17 But you know him (the Spirit of truth), for He lives with you and will be[j] in you for ever
Eph 1:13 When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit
Eph 1:14 Who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of God's possession
Eph 4:30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption

Christians are eternally secure because of the promises of the Word of God

John 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life ….
John 5:24 Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal …..
Rom 8:38f Neither death nor life, …. nor any powers, shall separate us from the love of God in Christ.
1 John 5:13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life

Christians are eternally secure because the gift God gives us is eternal.

John 5:24 Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

Heb 5:9 Christ is the author of the eternal salvation to all obey him. (Compare 9: 12).

Christians are eternally secure because they have a new nature

2 Cor 5:17 We are new creations in Christ.

1 John 3:9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God

1 John 5:4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world.

8.3 The Arminian Perspective

Arminians highlight that the list of "warnings" is extensive, including:

John 15:2, 6; Rom 8:12-14; 11:20-22; 1 Cor 3:17; 6:9-10 with ch. 5; 9:24-10:13; 15:1; 2 Cor 6:1; Gal 3:1-5 with 5:2-4; 5:19-21; 6:7-9; 1 Thess 4:3-8; Col 1:23; Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6; 1 Tim 3:6; 4:1; Heb 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 12:15-17; 2 Pet 2:20-22; 3:17; Rev 2:5; 3:3-5; 3:16; 22:19; Matt 5:13, 29-30; 6:15; 18:23-35; 22:11-13; 25:14-30 (= Luke 19:11-27); Mark 4:16-19; 13:13, 20-22, 32- 37; Luke 13:6-9; 14:28-33.

Christians can lose their salvation

a Plain statements

John 15:6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and cast into the fire.

1 Cor 15:2 "unless you have believed in vain"

Col 1:21 He has reconciled you ….. if you continue in the faith

See also: Luke 8:12,13; John 8:31; 1 Cor 9:27; Gal1:6; 5;4; Rev 3:5

b Severe warnings

Rom. 11:22 Consider the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.

Heb. 2:1 We must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

Heb 3:12 See to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God

Heb 10:26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,

See also: 1 Cor 10:12; Heb 3:14, 12:15; 2 Pet 1;10; 2 John 8.

c Clear examples

Acts 8:22-23 Repent of this wickedness and pray that the Lord may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

1 Tim 1:19-20 holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith. .

1 Tim 4:1 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

Heb 6:4-6 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened …., and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. They are crucifying the Son of God all over again ….

2 Pet 2:1-3 There will be false teachers among you who will introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.
2 Pet 2:21 It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then turn their backs on the sacred command that was given to them.
Jude 5 The Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe

d Consistent exhortations

Luke 9:62 No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.
Heb 3:12 Beware lest there be an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God
Heb 4:14 Let us hold fast our confession

8.4 Exploring the warning passages

a Salvation depends on continuance

1 Cor 15:2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.
Col 1:23 … and you He has reconciled, if you continue in your faith ….
2 Pet 1:10 be eager to make your calling and election sure. If you do these things, you will never fall.
Rom 11:22 Continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.
See also: Luke 8:13; Rom 11:22; Heb 6:4, 10;38.

b Salvation can be lost

John 15:4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.
Heb 6:4 – 6 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, **5** who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age **6** and who have fallen[a] away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace
Rev 3:5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

8.5 Pastoral implications

a Different kinds of faith

John 2:23 Many believed in His name ….. but Jesus did not commit Himself to them ….
John 6:64 There are some of you (disciples) who do not believe.

b Different kinds of church member

Matt 7:21–23 Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" shall enter the kingdom of heaven.
1 John 2:19 They went out from us because they were not of us.

The Bible writers want everyone to examine themselves (2 Corinthians 13:5)

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Appendix B Quotations from influential teachers

Chapter 2 The Sovereignty of God

2.1 God at the centre

What God plans – His Purposes (decrees)

"We assert that, by an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all determined, both whom he would admit to salvation and whom he would condemn to destruction."

Calvin, John. Book III, Chapter 21, Section 7

How God works – His sovereignty and providence

"God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfil his purposes." Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology. p315.

"If God is not sovereign over the entire created order, then he is not sovereign at all. If God is not sovereign, then he is not God. It's that simple".

Sproul R.C. "What is Reformed Theology? Kindle edition, p31.

2.2 Absolute Sovereignty (Calvinism)

"God's sovereign plan, whereby he decides all that is to happen in the entire universe. Nothing in the world happens by chance. God is in back of everything. He decides and causes all things to happen that do happen." Palmer, Edwin. The Five Points of Calvinism: Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010, p. 30.

2.3 Absolute sovereignty explored.

"Plainly it was God's will that sin should enter this world, otherwise it would not have entered, for nothing happens except what God has eternally decreed. Moreover, there was more than a simple permission, for God only permits things that fulfil his purpose." A.W Pink, The Sovereignty of God, 2009, p162

God… orders and controls all things, human actions among them…He [also] holds every man responsible for the choices he makes and the courses of action he pursues… Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled … To our finite minds, of course, the thing is inexplicable.

J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 19-23.

2.4 Limited Sovereignty (Arminianism)

"God is sovereign in the sense that he is in control of every event that takes place among creatures, whether he actually causes it (which is often the case), or simply permits it to happen (instead of preventing it, which he could do if he so chose). Either way God is 'in charge'; he is sovereign."

Cottrell, Jack, The Faith Once For All (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2002), p81.

God has obviously granted to human beings a degree of freedom even to hurt Him and thwart His will (only up to a point, of course). God remains omnipotent and omniscient, and He is therefore omni-resourceful and able to respond to whatever free people do in the wisest way to preserve His plan and bring about the ends He has decided upon. Olson, Roger, Against Calvinism, Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition p132.

Having created humans as autonomous beings, God allowed but did not cause them to sin. By granting them this autonomy, He thereby chose to limit the exercise of His sovereignty.

Genesis 9:6 provides an important insight about God's self-limitation. Here God gave up the responsibility to directly punish murderers. That responsibility is now in the hands of judges and magistrates, whose God-like authority is confirmed in Psalm 82:6, Matthew 22:15-22, and Romans 13:1-7.

Olson, C. Gordon, Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism, Global Gospel Publisher, p61.

2.5 Limited sovereignty explored

From a Calvinist perspective:

"To say that God is sovereign but that He has limited His sovereignty by the free will of man is to affirm that man's will is sovereign, and God is not sovereign. This is the Arminian heresy."

A.W. Pink. Source unknown.

"Arminianism... so stresses the freedom of man's will as virtually to make man sovereign and reduce God to a spectator in the realm of human affairs". J.I. Packer, from "Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God".

From an Arminian perspective:

Scottish Presbyterian theologian James Orr criticized Calvin's idea of God's sovereignty because in it "love is subordinated to sovereignty, instead of sovereignty to love."

Olson, Roger, Against Calvinism, Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition, p31.

The question is what kind of creation did God purpose to make?... One in which He predetermines every specific motion … or one where He has freely given a measure of freedom to individuals … Arminians believe the latter was the kind of world God decided to make and this was His sovereign decree. …. To be sure, giving a choice to His creatures involved the choice to impose limitations on Himself.

J. W. Cottrell in "Grace of God, the will of man", edited by Clark Pinnock, p107.

Chapter 3 The dark side of sovereignty

3.1 Do humans have free will?

"But how few men are there, I ask, who when they hear free will attributed to man do not immediately conceive him to be a master of both his own mind and will, able of his own power to turn himself toward either good or evil. I'd prefer not to use it myself, and I should like others, if they seek my advice, to avoid it." Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion. Book II, Chapter 2, Section 8.

"If in His absolute freedom God has willed to give man limited freedom, who is there to stay His hand or say, 'What doest thou?' Man's will is free because God is sovereign. A God less than sovereign could not bestow moral freedom upon His creatures. He would be afraid to do so."

Tozer, A. W. The Knowledge of the Holy, chapter 22 "The Sovereignty of God".

Libertarian free will means that, "whatever other influences may lead toward a decision, the influence that settles the choice is the human self". Piper, John. Does God desire all to be saved, Crossway, p40

3.2 Observations on Determinism

From a Calvinist perspective

To sum up, since God's will is said to be the cause of all things, I have made His providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only in order to display its force in the elect, who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also to compel the reprobate to obedience".

Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book I, Chapter 16 and Book 3, Chapter 23.

"God's decree includes every event in all its details, including the means as well as the end, the causes as well as the effects, the conditions and instrumentalities as well as the results. The divine decree is eternal, immutable and absolute, based on God's wisdom and, with regard to sin, it is permissive"

Berkhof, Louis "Systematic Theology", pp103 – 105.

"God decrees all things, even all sins."

The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 2, Banner of Truth, p. 527.

"God wills everything that comes to pass... But God wills what comes to pass in different ways. Some things He brings about directly and immediately, and some things through secondary causes. Some things He wills positively, and some things He merely permits negatively." Sproul, R.C. "Chosen by God" (Chapter 2).

From an Arminian perspective

"Suppose I can take either of two routes to a destination: In fact, I will be free to choose either route, depending on what I feel at that time. God knows that I will be free to make either choice tomorrow. Likewise, he knows which choice I will make. His knowledge of which I will choose, as knowledge, does not limit my choice; indeed, he also perfectly knows what would happen if I should make the other choice".

Source unknown

"If determinism is true, then God is the first cause of sin. However, since God is not the cause of sin, then causal determinism cannot be true. If a starting assumption logically compels one to a conclusion outside the boundaries set by Scripture, then the starting assumption must be wrong.

Keathley, Kenneth. Salvation and Sovereignty (p. 84). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

"Having endowed his creatures with free will, God permits them to exercise it even when they use it to rebel against Him".

Cottrell, Jack. The Faith Once For All (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2002), p165

Hard determinism is the belief that every action is caused by something or someone such that the action is inevitable and no other action is possible. There is no such thing as a free act, that is, one which has no cause and thus no causal history. Thus, hard determinism is incompatible with free will.

Walls, J. and Dongell, J. Why I Am Not a Calvinist (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), p100ff.

Both Calvinism and free - will theism affirm free will and yet define it completely differently. Calvinist free will means you are free so long as you are doing what you want. As long as you are acting on your strongest inclination, you are free, regardless of whether or not you could do otherwise. Hence in Calvinism, God unilaterally determines your inclinations so that you must do what he ordains for you to do, and yet you still "freely "do it. So if God determines that you will want to reject Jesus, you are still freely rejecting him—even though God determined it and you could not have done otherwise—because you were doing what you wanted.

Fischer, Austin. Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition, p73.

3.3 Observations on Libertarianism

From an Arminian perspective

"the first commitment of Arminians is to uphold the character of God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. Arminians believe in free will because they see it everywhere assumed in the Bible, and because it is necessary to protect God's reputation. God is necessarily and by nature good; Arminius's main concern was to avoid making God the author of sin".

Olson, Roger E. Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities IVP. Kindle Edition. pp98, 102.

"We affirm that God, as an expression of his sovereignty, endows each person with actual free will (the ability to choose between two options), which must be exercised in accepting or rejecting God's gracious call to salvation by the Holy Spirit through the gospel….. Affirming the reality of a robust view of free will in no way jeopardizes an equally robust view of God's sovereignty".

Anyone Can Be Saved: Wipf and Stock, (Kindle Locations 631 and 2963).

"God has created us as persons with the innate power to initiate actions without interference, coercion, or fore-ordination. This does not imply total autonomy since the will operates within the boundaries of God's controlling sovereignty and human finitude. It does include, however, the ability to choose between moral opposites, without the choice being fixed or determined (either ahead of time or at the time) by some power outside the person himself". Cottrell, Jack. The Faith Once for All: Bible Doctrine for Today, 157.

From a Calvinist perspective

"Free-will' is an utter fallacy." Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1957)

"Free will is the invention of man, instigated by the devil"

David Wilmoth, *The Baptist Examiner,* September 16, 1989, p5.

"By nature we are slaves to sin. This does not mean that the fall has destroyed or eradicated the human will. Fallen man still has all the faculties to make choices. We still have a mind and a will. The problem is not that we cannot make choices. The problem is that, in our fallen condition, we only make sinful choices. We make these choices freely. We sin precisely because we want to sin".

Sproul R.C. What is reformed theology, Kindle edition, p152

3.4 If God is sovereign where did evil come from?

From a Calvinist perspective

"We know that God is sovereign because we know that God is God. Therefore, we must conclude that God foreordained sin. What else can we conclude? We must conclude that God's decision to allow sin to enter the world was a good decision. This is not to say that our sin is really a good thing, but merely that God's allowing us to do sin, which is evil, is a good thing. God's allowing evil is good, but the evil he allows is still evil. . . . The fact that God decided to allow us to sin does not absolve us from our responsibility for sin."

Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, pp 31-32

"God ordains sin, and man is to blame…. Sin is…foreordained by God…God ordained…every evil thought, word, and deed in all of history."

Palmer, Edwin. The Five Points of Calvinism (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1999), 24-5, 82, 97-100, 116.

"God brings about all things in accordance with his will. It isn't just that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those that love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects… This includes God's having even brought about the Nazi's brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz ….. and even the sexual abuse of a young child." Mark Talbot, edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor, Suffering and the Sovereignty of God, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2006) 41-42

"The first man fell because the Lord deemed it meet that he should: why he deemed it meet, we know not… Man therefore falls, divine providence so ordaining but he falls by his own fault."

John Calvin, Inst. III.xxiii.8. See A.N.S. Lane, "Did Calvin Believe in Freewill?" Vox Evangelica 12 (1981): 73.

From an Arminian perspective

"God might have prevented sin from entering the world; but it was His will not so to do, because He could not in such prevention bestow upon His rational creatures that liberty which is necessary to render them accountable for their actions." Arminius, Jacob. Works of James Arminius, Vol. 2, p. 369.

3.5 Why did God allow sin to come into the world?

Calvinist perspective

Berkhof "The decree to permit sin makes God the author of free moral beings, who are themselves the authors of sin. God decrees to sustain their free agency and to permit that free agency to exert itself in a multitude of acts, of which some are sinful. For good and holy reasons, He renders these sinful acts certain, but He does not decree to work evil desires or choices efficiently in man. God's decree to permit sin, while it renders the entrance of sin into the world certain, does not mean that He takes delight in it; but only that He deemed it wise, to advance His purpose, to permit moral evil, however abhorrent it may be to His nature". Berkhof, Louis. Systematic Theology, p108.

"God allowed evil to come into existence, not because He is powerless to stop it, nor because He is somehow pleased with it in itself, but because through its existence, He can bring about a greater good that would otherwise not be possible…….. God's ultimate aim for history is to display the full range of His glory for the enjoyment of His redeemed people. That is, He intends to reveal His greatness—His holiness, justice, wrath, wisdom, power, and His grace, love, and mercy. Many of these attributes, however, would remain hidden if there were no sin and no suffering."

Piper, John. Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ, pp. 23, 37.

Arminian perspective

Meaningful choice is essential for genuine love. Suppose that through threats, drugs, or hypnotism, I could coerce my wife to love me. First, it would be a contradiction in terms. Her "loving" words and actions would be an illusion. I don't want to force her to love me, and if I somehow did, her "love" would not be love at all. I want her to love me simply because she wants to. Love requires the freedom not to love. When determinism is taken to its logical conclusion it leads to a God not found in Scripture.

Alcorn, Randy. hand in Hand (p. 154). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

There is no mystery why sin came into the world. Sin came into this world because God wanted mankind to love Him of their own free will.

Raymond, Bob. Is God Calvinist or Arminian? Kindle Edition. Loc 1016.

One wonders why God would want to manifest his "glory in wrath," especially when the Bible contends that he does not afflict willingly nor desire that any perish.

Peckham, John, "Does God always get what He wants", p13

3.6 What kind of God is this

Does the God on the cross look like the God of Calvinism? In the crucified Jesus, we learn that the God who pours out wrath is the God whose hands are nailed to the cross. The God who punishes sin is the God who takes the punishment. The God who judges is the God who looks upon those crucifying him and says, "Forgive them." I found the crucified God very difficult to square with the God of Calvinism.

Fischer, Austin. Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed, Cascade Books, Kindle Edition p46.

The difference between Arminian and Calvinist theologies does not lie in man-centeredness versus God-centeredness. True Arminianism is as thoroughly God-centered as Calvinism. The difference, rather, lies in

the nature and character of the God who stands at the centres of these two systems. The God who stands at the center of classical Calvinism of the TULIP variety is a morally ambiguous being of power and control …… The God who stands at the center of classical Arminianism is the God of Jesus Christ, full of love and compassion as well as justice and wrath who voluntarily limits his power to allow creaturely rebellion but is nevertheless the source of all good for whose glory and honor everything except sin exists.

Olson, Roger E. Arminianism is God-centred theology, p16

(We do not need to) "choose between God's love and glory because God wills to glorify himself as the God who, freely and sovereignly, loves at all costs … The glory of God is the glory of love".
Fischer, Austin. Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition, p58

"The God of Scripture is infinite in wisdom and goodness as well as in power. His sovereignty is not the sovereignty of a tyrannical despot, but the exercised pleasure of one who is infinitely wise and good!"

Pink, A.W. The sovereignty of God.

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell… is the same God who has made open the door of mercy, and is calling to you… with a loud voice." Edwards, Jonathan. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God (1741).

"God works in the world through providence. In fact, there is never a millisecond in which it is not operating. Without interrupting the natural law, without suspending natural process, God accomplishes His purpose, by taking all of the infinite number of attitudes, expressions, acts, and behaviours of free human beings and spiritual beings who make choices and do things, and God takes them all and weaves them perfectly into His own purpose. He weaves together all of the infinite behaviours of men and demons with meticulous precision to fulfil exactly His will. This is a far greater display of divine wisdom and a far greater display of divine power than a momentary interruption of the natural law.

Sermon from John MacArthur.

Chapter 4 Total Depravity

4.1 The Bible's perspective on human nature

The Westminster Confession of Faith declares: "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto." Sproul R.C. What is Reformed Theology? Kindle Edition, p150

In and of himself the natural man has power to reject Christ, but in and of himself he has not the power to receive Christ….. At the outset, we are confronted with the fact that the natural man is unable to love and serve God, and that, of himself, he cannot repent and believe. Pink, A.W. Sovereignty of God, 128, 187.

Total depravity does not mean that man is as wicked or sinful as he could be, nor does it mean that man is without a conscience or any sense of right or wrong. Neither does it mean that man does not or cannot do things that seem to be good when viewed from a human perspective. It does not even mean that man cannot do things that seem to conform outwardly to the law of God. What the Bible does teach is that even the "good" things man does are tainted by sin because they are not done for the glory of God and out of faith in Him. While man looks upon the outward acts and judges them to be good, God looks upon the inward motives that lie behind them, and because they proceed from a heart that is in rebellion against Him and they are not done for His glory, even these good deeds are like "filthy rags" in His sight".

https://www.gotquestions.org/about.html

4.2 The Calvinist perspective on Total Depravity and salvation

To be dead in sin is to be in a state of moral and spiritual bondage. By nature, we are slaves to sin. This does not mean that the fall has destroyed or eradicated the human will. We still have a mind and a will. The problem is not that we cannot make choices. The problem is that, in our fallen condition, we make sinful choices. We make these choices freely. We sin precisely because we want to sin, and we are capable of choosing exactly what we want to choose.

Sproul R.C. What is Reformed Theology? Kindle Edition, p152

4.3 Total Depravity and salvation from an Arminian perspective

The Arminian Confession of 1621 affirms that the fallen human person is completely incapable of saving faith and that he or she is totally dependent on grace for any and every good.

Pinnock, Clark H.. Grace for All: The Arminian Dynamics of Salvation (p. 9). Kindle Edition

In this [fallen] state, the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace.

Jacob Arminius, Disputation 11: On the Free Will of Man and Its Powers, Section 7,

Semi-Pelagians argued that every human being has a principle of good, a gift of nature, an incipient faith, and the ability to turn to God with prayer. The semi-Pelagians taught that man can move in his will and meet grace for salvation. Arminianism proper holds to total depravity and total inability along with Calvinists. Not only this, but Arminianism historically rejects Pelagianism and semi - Pelagianism.

Campbell, Nicholas. Tiptoeing Through TULIP: (p. 58). Christ is the Cure. Kindle Edition.

Humans are bound to a corrupt nature that pervades the entire person. However, this does not indicate (a) that every person is as bad as he can be, or (b) that every person commits every sin. Humans are therefore incapable of genuinely desiring good and are not capable of choosing God without Divine grace

Robert E. Picirilli, Grace, Faith, Free Will (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 2002) p 142.

Before a sinful man can think a right thought of God, there must have been a work of enlightenment done within him. We pursue God because He has first put an urge within us …… and it is by this very prevenient drawing that God takes from us every vestige of credit for the act of coming.

Tozer, The Pursuit of God (1961: Marshall Morgan & Scott Ltd.), pp. 11-12

HUMANITY was created in the image of God, good and upright, but fell from its original sinless state through wilful disobedience, leaving humanity sinful, separated from God, and under the sentence of divine condemnation … Therefore, human beings are not able to think, will, nor do anything good in and of themselves, including merit favour from God, save ourselves from the judgment and condemnation of God that we deserve for our sin, or even believe the gospel … If anyone is to be saved, God must take the initiative. Brian Abasciano and Martin Glynn, President and Vice-President respectively of the Society of Evangelical Arminians.

https://arminiantheologyblog.wordpress.com/2012/10/09/do-arminians-believe-in-total-depravity/

It is clear that sin has placed man under condemnation … It is clear that fallen man cannot please God and has no fellowship with God … It is clear that man cannot come to God without the drawing power of the Holy Spirit. It is clear that a work so drastic as to be called a new birth is required for man's salvation.

Leroy Forlines, Classical Arminianism (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 2011),

The quotations above show the Arminian position on total depravity.
The three quotations below show how Calvinists understand the Arminian position.

Arminianism teaches that, "The sinner has the power to either cooperate with God's Spirit and be regenerated or resist God's grace and perish. The lost sinner needs the Spirit's assistance, but he does not have to be regenerated by the Spirit before he can believe, for faith is man's act and precedes the new birth. Faith is the sinner's gift to God; it is man's contribution to salvation.

Steele, D., Thomas, C., and Quinn, S., The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented (2004: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2nd Ed.), pp. 5-6

Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him ….., Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him.

JI Packer, "Introductory Essay," in John Owen, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), pp3-4.

The contemporary idea today is that there's some residual good left in the sinner. (This idea) … was defined a little more carefully by Wesley, who was a sort of messed up Calvinist, because he wanted to give all the glory to God, but he also wanted to find in man some place where man could initiate salvation on his own will… So that the sinner, un-aided by the Holy Spirit, must make the first move. That's essentially Arminian theology: The sinner, un-aided, must make the first move.

John MacArthur …… https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTqimCh4OnA

In the light of the three quotations above, it is interesting to note Wesley's own comment: "to say, ' This man is an Arminian', has the same effect on many hearers, as to say ' This is a mad dog. '"

The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. 10:358

4.4 Examination of the issues raised

Can non-Christians seek God?

…if the words in Romans 3 [vv.10-12] mean anything, not one unregenerate person has ever sought after God—not one.

Douglas Wilson, in Back to Basics: Rediscovering the Richness of the Reformed Faith, D G. Hagopian, Ed. 26

The Holy Spirit's prevenient work stirs in every person the ability to seek after God, to hunger for Him, and to respond freely to the grace that is universally offered.

Oden Thomas, The Transforming Power of Grace, Chapter 3

Jesus said John 5:24-29. "I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live (John 5: 24 – 29). Note that the spiritually dead are able to hear Christ's voice and respond".

Olson, C. Gordon, Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism, Global Gospel Publisher, p59.

Do god's invitations imply ability to respond?

The commands of God to repent and believe do not imply natural ability in fallen man, but rather reveal our utter dependence on the grace of God to enable what He commands."

Owen, John. The Death of Death in the Death of Christ, Book IV, Chapter 1

God's commands always presuppose the grace that enables obedience. When He invites us to come to Him, He provides the ability through prevenient grace to respond freely.

Wesley, John. Sermon 85: On Working Out Our Own Salvation

Chapter 5 Unconditional election

"In addition to having perfect knowledge of the past and the present, God has perfect "foreknowledge," … including knowledge of future contingent choices of free-will beings. Predestination to eternal life is based on God's foreknowledge of who would and who would not meet the conditions that constitute a proper response to his grace".
Jack Cottrell, The Faith Once For All (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2002), pp86, 394.

"Many confuse the certainty of a future event with the determination of that event by God. God knows all future events as certain, whether He has determined them or not. His omniscience is unlimited. In making the certainty of the future contingent upon God's determining it, the Calvinistic future must be totally determined". Olson, C. Gordon, Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism, Global Gospel Publisher, p35.

5.2 Election - Key Ideas

Unconditional election.

"…the reason why God elects some and rejects others is to be found in His purpose alone. … before men are born their lot is assigned to each of them by the secret will of God. … the salvation or the destruction of men depends on His free election."

Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: Romans and Thessalonians, p.203

Conditional election

"Arminians believe that God's election of individuals to salvation is conditional upon their response of faith, foreseen by God but not caused by Him."

Olson, Roger E.. Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities IVP. Kindle Edition. Ch4.

5.3 Predestination

God's decision, made in eternity before the world and its inhabitants existed, regarding the final destiny of individual sinners. In this decision God chose some for salvation (the elect) and some for condemnation (the reprobate).

J.I. Packer, Concise Theology, (Carol Stream, Il: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), pp37 – 39.

What predestination means, in its most elementary form, is that God, from all eternity, decided to save some members of the human race and to let the rest of the human race perish.

Sproul, R. C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, p22.

The idea that there may be unrighteousness in God is related to God's choice of some for salvation while passing over others. It still seems that if God gives grace to one person, in the interest of fairness he "ought" to give grace equally to another. It is precisely this "oughtness" that is foreign to the biblical concept of grace.

Sproul, R. C. What is Reformed Theology? Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. P175.

Those who are saved are beneficiaries of his sovereign grace and mercy. Those who are not saved are not victims of his cruelty or injustice; they are recipients of justice.

Sproul, R. C. What is Reformed Theology? Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. P176.

Calvinists distinguish between single and double predestination:

Single predestination

"If there is such a thing as predestination at all, and if that predestination does not include all people, then we must not shrink from the necessary inference that there are two sides to predestination. It is not enough to talk about Jacob; we must also consider Esau."

Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, p141.

God is "for" his elect in a special way, displaying his love for them. He turns his face away from those wicked people who are not the objects of his special grace. Those whom he loves …. receive his mercy. Those whom he "hates" receive his justice. No one is treated in an unjust manner.

Sproul, R. C.. What is Reformed Theology? Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. p187.

Double predestination

"The reprobation of the non-elect is not simply a negative act of God in passing by them, it is a positive decree. God's decree reprobating the wicked is as truly active as His decree concerning the salvation of the elect." A.W. Pink, The Sovereignty of God, Chapter 5.

This is how we must understand double predestination. God gives mercy to the elect by working faith in their hearts. He gives justice to the reprobate by leaving them in their own sins. There is no symmetry here. One group receives mercy, the other receives justice. No one is a victim of injustice. None can complain that there is unrighteousness in God. Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God, Scripture Press, p 147

5.4 Reprobation

"God decreed to withhold salvation from some sinners. Moreover, He foreordained to withhold from them all the effectual means of salvation. He decreed not to give them faith and repentance. And He further decreed their final end, namely, punishment for their sins, thereby glorifying God's justice, power and wrath. The final answer why some are lost and others saved goes back to eternity and is to be found in God, not Man. Daniel, Curt. History and theology of Calvinism, Ch 47.

"If God wants to save people and they are not saved, it is not because some other power is preventing this from happening, it is because God wants something even better to happen. What does God will more than saving all? … The answer given by Calvinists is that the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy (Rom 9:22 – 23) and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all credit to God for his salvation". Piper, J. Does God desire all to be saved?, Crossway, p38.

"Calvinism teaches that the non-elect have no opportunity to have everlasting life. They are doomed even before they are conceived or before they draw their first breath. In addition, Calvinism teaches that God made this decision unconditionally. God simply chose".

Wilkin, Robert N. Is Calvinism Biblical? Let the Scriptures Decide (p. 29). Kindle Edition

The answer to the question "Is God less glorious because he ordained that evil be?" is no, just the opposite. God is more glorious for having conceived and created and governed a world like this with all its evil".
John Piper https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/is-god-less-glorious-because-he-ordained-that-evil-be

The Arminian response:
David Bentley Hart, for example, vehemently rejects such attempts to "justify" God's ways. He insists that "It requires us to believe in and love a God whose good ends will be realized not only in spite of but entirely by way of— every cruelty, every catastrophe, every betrayal, every sin the world has ever known.
D. B. Hart, The Doors of the Sea, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005, p. 99.

The problem with Calvinism is that its deep, inner logic leads inexorably to exalting God's glory over and even against his love. Apparently, God can or must limit his love, but he can't limit his self - glorification. I would put it the other way around and say that in light of Christ's self - emptying (Phil 2:7), God can limit his glory, power, majesty, sovereignty, but not his love (because God is love; see 1 John 4:16).
Olson, Roger E.. Against Calvinism. Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition, p114.

Was not the cross of Jesus Christ a sufficient manifestation of God's justice and hatred toward sin? (Not that Jesus was a sinner but the sin of the world was laid on him partly to display how seriously God takes sin.) Calvinists' speculative reason for reprobation would seem to lessen the glory of the cross.
Olson, Roger E. Against Calvinism. Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition, p46.

The reprobate are those humans who, before they existed, were chosen by God to spend eternity in hell. And to be clear, the reprobate will spend eternity in hell for sins God ordained they would commit —they were created so they could be damned. If you don't cringe a little, you don't have a pulse.
Fischer, Austin. Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. pp. 22,23.

Louis Berkhof, (speaking against the teaching that God does not love the non-elect - that God only expresses disfavour, hatred and wrath towards them). "In speaking on this subject we ought to be very careful and allow ourselves to be guided by the explicit statements of Scripture rather than by our bold inferences from the secret counsel of God. There is far more in God than we can reduce to our logical categories". Berkhof, Louis. Systematic Theology, P445.

Chapter 6 Limited Atonement

6.1 Concept of the atonement

"The atonement, as taught in the Scriptures, is that aspect of Christ's work by which He takes upon Himself the penalty due to sin, so as to make satisfaction to divine justice, and thereby reconcile sinners to God."

Berkhof, Louis. Systematic Theology, p365.

6.2 Nature of the atonement

Extent of the atonement

Calvinism. "Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only and actually secured salvation for them. His death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ's redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation, including faith which unites them to Him. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, thereby guaranteeing their salvation".

Source unknown.

Arminianism. "Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men, only those who believe in Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it".

David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline,* p145.

Intent of the atonement

Historical or main line Calvinism has consistently maintained that Christ's redeeming work was definite in design and accomplishment – that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and for no one else . . . Christ did not die simply to make it possible for God to pardon sinners.

Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, Five Points of Calvinism, pp39-40,

"The atonement is the central doctrine of the Christian faith, and Christ's intention in it was not simply to make salvation possible, but to actually secure salvation for those whom the Father had given Him."

J.I. Packer, "Introductory Essay" in John Owen's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ

6.3 Unlimited (or General) Atonement

"The price of redemption, which Christ offered to the Father, is not only sufficient for the whole world, but was actually offered for the whole world... God has decreed to justify and save those who believe in Jesus Christ and persevere in faith." Jacob Arminius, The Works of James Arminius, Vol. 1, Article 1, Section 10

"Without the slightest inconsistency…. (Arminians)… may believe in an election according to sovereign grace, that none but the elect will be saved, that all of the elect will be saved, and that the elect are by divine enablement alone called out of the state of spiritual death from which they are impotent to take even one step in the direction of their own salvation. The text, "No man can come to me, except the Father

which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44), is as much a part of the one system of doctrine as it is of the other. Lewis Sperry Chafer, For whom did Christ die? Journal: Bibliotheca Sacra.

6.4 Limited atonement

"Christ died only for the believer, the elect, only for those who will actually be saved and go to heaven. According to the Calvinist, Christ intended or purposed that his atonement should pay for the sins of only those the Father had given him."

Palmer, Edwin. The Five Points of Calvinism (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), p50.

"Christ did not die for all men, but only for those who were given to Him by the Father... His death was effective and intentional for those who are saved."

John Owen, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ, Book I, Chapter 3

when Christ died particularly for his bride, he did not simply create a possibility or an opportunity for salvation, but really purchased and infallibly secured for them all that is necessary to get them saved, including the grace of regeneration and the gift of faith.
So when Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the sheep," he means, by my blood I purchase those my Father has given to me, and I secure their faith and all the blessings that come to those who are united with me.
Piper, John. Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God (Christian Focus, 2013), pp40, 46.

Theological considerations

"If Christ's atonement was truly for every single individual, then how could God justly send anyone to hell? Wouldn't that be a double payment of the debt owed for sin? The justice of God forbids it."

R.C. Sproul, Chosen by God (1986), Chapter 6

"God, being righteous, does not punish the same sins twice, and since Christ has borne the punishment for His people's sins, there is no punishment left for them. To claim that Christ died for all but that many still suffer punishment would suggest a double payment for sin."

Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ (Vol. 3).

"We are told in scripture that Christ died for sinners … Where do we read, even once, that he did not die for all (sinners)? Where are we informed that there are some for whom Christ did not die? Nowhere".

Douty, Norman: Did Christ die only for the elect?, Wipf and Stock Publishers, p3

It is true that God does not love everybody in the same sense, but this does not mean that there are some whom he does not love in any sense.

Douty, Norman: Did Christ die only for the elect?, Wipf and Stock Publishers, p12.

Chapter 7 Irresistible Grace

7.1 Understanding Grace

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ are expressions of God's grace. The offer of the gospel is grace. The work of the Holy Spirit is grace. The salvation of any person is grace. All of these are examples of God's grace. The conviction of the Holy Spirit is a gracious act of God. The power of the gospel unto salvation (Rom 1:16) is a gracious act of God. Everything is of grace.

Anyone can be saved, Edited by Allen, Hankins and Harwood, page 69 (Kindle edition)

Common Grace

Common grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation. …. Common grace is different from saving grace in its results (it does not bring about salvation), in its recipients (it is given to believers and unbelievers alike), and in its source (it does not directly flow from Christ's atoning work, …). Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology, p657

7.2 Irresistible Grace

When Calvinists refer to irresistible grace, they mean to say that the Holy Spirit is able, when he so chooses, to overcome all human resistance and so cause his gracious work to be utterly effective and ultimately irresistible. In soteriology, the doctrine of irresistible grace refers to the Spirit's work to overcome all sin-induced resistance and rebellion, opening blind eyes and enlivening hardened hearts so that sinners understand and embrace the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ. Bruce Ware, the place of effectual calling and grace in a Calvinist soteriology," Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p 347.

Calvinists and Arminians both uphold a grace that comes before, with the distinction that Arminians believe in a universal grace that is resistible while Calvinists maintain a particular grace that is irresistible.

Matthew Pinson, 40 Questions About Arminianism (Kregel Publications, 2022), p. 283

To deny irresistible grace, to teach free will, is to teach that salvation depends upon the will and work of man. It is to teach grace *plus* works rather than grace alone. That is not the gospel, but another gospel, a false gospel, a gospel that is no gospel at all. All non-Calvinist religions are synergistic i.e. teach salvation is a cooperative effort between the will of God and the will of man. Arminians are in this respect closer to Catholicism. The will of man is the deciding factor. God may do 99% but that 1% is the deciding factor.

Source unknown

7.3 Prevenient Grace

This is the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible. Olson, Roger, Arminian Theology (IVP), p35.

"prevenient grace " refers to God's grace that precedes salvation, including that part of salvation known as regeneration, which is the beginning of eternal spiritual life granted to all who trust in Christ (John 1 : 12 - 13). It is the grace that, among other things, frees our wills to believe in Christ and his gospel. As Titus 2 : 11 says, " For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people. "

Brian Abasciano, The FACTS of Salvation: A Summary of Arminian Theology/the Biblical Doctrines of Grace, http://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theologythe-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/

"Man is so totally depraved that he is unable to save himself-to get to God on his own. Yet God in His grace reaches out to man and draws him, convicts him, and 'excites him by divine grace.' However, man has the free will to resist and reject this grace.
J. Matthew Pinson, A Free Will Baptist Handbook: (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 1998), p. 47.

“Common grace, as Calvinists define it, has no saving direction and purpose in it, whereas a Wesleyan views all of god’s gracious work as having saving direction and intention”.

Jerry Walls, J. and Dongell, J. Why I Am Not a Calvinist (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), p68.

“Wesley believed God extends prevenient grace to the sinner to give him an ability to believe the gospel. Prevenient grace enables the individual to accept God’s gift of eternal life but does not ensure that he’ll accept it. Prevenient grace is important to understand because some Calvinists stereotype all Arminians as semi-Pelagian. Pelagius taught that people are born morally neutral and don’t need God’s grace”.

Alcorn, Randy. hand in Hand (p. 83). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

7.4 How does God draw us?

The Scripture makes faith the unmistakable, undeniable responsibility of man, as enabled by grace, in order to receive salvation. The Scripture is lucid, as well as deliberately commanding and compelling, in presenting Christ as praying for the lost and pleading with man to repent and believe and scolding nonbelievers for their unbelief (Matt 11 : 20 – 24 ; 23 : 37 ; Luke 23 : 34 ; John 5 : 40 – 47 ; 11: 42) . Such pleading is disingenuous if God knows that man cannot do what he has pleaded with him to do (John 7:17),

Anyone can be saved, Edited by Allen, Hankins and Harwood, page 83 (Kindle edition).

God quickens the dead. As the outward call of God to faith in Christ is communicated through the reading, preaching, and explaining of the contents of the Bible, the Holy Spirit enlightens and renews the heart of elect sinners so that they understand the gospel and embrace it as truth from God.

Packer, J.I. Concise Theology: (Tyndale House Publishers, Incorporated, 1993), p. 153.

7.5 Faith: Key Issues

Is faith a gift?

"Saving faith is not a work of man but a work of God in man, a supernatural gift that enables spiritual understanding and response." Packer J.I. Knowing God, 1973

“That faith is required is not disputed. What is disputed is the origin of the faith in question. Is the faith owned by God and given to man as a gift (in the sense that God’s grace is given to man as a gift) or is it an individual’s faith?”

Anyone can be saved, Edited by Allen, Hankins and Harwood, page 70 (Kindle edition).

Is faith a work?

Loraine Boettner: "Arminianism effectively makes salvation a cooperative effort where human free will becomes the decisive factor, thereby transforming faith into a self-generated work."

Boettner, Loraine, The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination, Ch 11.

Man cannot exercise saving faith on his own apart from enabling grace. But the very nature of faith itself means one can do otherwise than believe. It is not true that man’s free will unassisted by enabling grace is sufficient to believe. To accuse non-Calvinists of this is a straw man. Our faith in Christ is the means, the instrument, by which we receive (not achieve) His salvation. Faith is not a "work" in the sense that it

achieves our salvation in and of itself. Our expression of faith in God is the result of our awareness that we cannot work for our own salvation and that we need His grace.

https://www.truthinformed.com/is-faith-a-work-a-gift-or-neither/

7.6 Which comes first – faith or regeneration?

A man is not regenerated because he has first believed in Christ, but he believes in Christ because he has been regenerated. Pink A.W. The wisdom of Arthur W. Pink, vol1, Zeeland Reformed Church, 2009, p65.

Unless regeneration takes place first, there is no possibility of faith.

Sproul R.C. Regeneration precedes faith, Tabletalk, Feb 1997, p35.

The people had sinned against God. The serpents came and bit them and through their poison many were dying. God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. Then did Moses command the people: 'Whoever among you has received new life, let him look to the serpent'? No, I think not. The Scripture says, 'as many as looked, lived'. It doesn't say, 'as many as lived, looked', In the analogy, it was looking to the serpent. In the reality, it is believing on Christ. Both the looking and the believing preceded the receiving of new life. That is the gospel from the lips of our blessed Lord Jesus.

Gooding, D. the glorious gospel of the blessed God. p18
file:///C:/Users/clark/OneDrive/Desktop/Calvinism%20working/Processing/Internet%20authors/gospel-the-glorious-gospel-of-the-blessed-god-%20%20David%20Gooding.pdf

"There is not one scripture that states clearly the doctrine that regeneration comes first and then faith follows—*not one".* Dave Hunt, What love is this? p17.

Chapter 8 Perseverance of the saints

Once Saved, Always Saved – or – Can true believers fall away from grace?

8.2 The Calvinist Perspective

"As he has begun the good work in us, so will he perfect it. We have no reason to doubt that he will carry to completion what he has begun."

Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 3, Chapter 24, Section 6.

"They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved." Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XVII, Section 1.

"The perseverance of the saints does not mean that they will never fall into sin, but that they will never finally fall away." Hodge, Charles. Systematic Theology, Vol. 3, Chapter 16.

"If you have saving faith today, you will have it tomorrow and forever, not because you are strong, but because God is faithful." Sproul, R.C. Essential Truths of the Christian Faith (1992), p. 223.

Perseverance may be defined as that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion. It is because God never forsakes His work that believers continue to the very end.

Berkhof Louis, Systematic theology, p546.

8.3 The Arminian Perspective

The Five Articles of the Remonstrants (1610)

"But whether they [true believers] can through neglect fall from grace, turn away from the holy doctrine which was once delivered to them, make shipwreck of their conscience and become devoid of grace—this must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scriptures before we can teach it with full confidence."

The Five Articles of the Remonstrants, Article 5 (1610).

Though initially cautious, later Arminians affirmed the view that true believers could indeed fall away.

"Final salvation is conditional upon continued faith and obedience. The doctrine of eternal security as taught by Calvinism finds no support in the general tenor of Scripture."

H. Orton Wiley, Christian Theology, Vol. 2, p. 376.

"The Scriptures teach that saving faith perseveres, but they also warn believers against the danger of falling away and thus failing to obtain final salvation."

Picirilli, Robert E. Grace, Faith, Free Will, Randall House Publications), p. 200.

"If salvation is received and retained by faith, then it logically follows that salvation may be lost by unbelief. The Scriptures abound in warnings against such a fall."

H. Orton Wiley, Christian Theology, Vol. 2, p. 349.

"Arminians do not believe a person can lose their salvation easily or accidentally. Salvation is only lost through persistent, wilful rebellion and rejection of Christ."

Matthew J. Ayars, https://mattayars.com/an-arminian-rebuttal-to-the-calvinist-accusation-that-arminianism-undermines-assurance-of-salvation/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

8.4 Exploring the warning passages

"From an Arminian perspective, the warnings in Scripture are not empty threats but real possibilities, meant to encourage believers to persevere in their faith. They serve as genuine calls to remain in Christ, recognizing that apostasy is possible."

Olson, Roger. Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities, p. 190.

"These threatenings, then, are God's ordinance, appointed for the good of the saints, to excite them to the use of means, to caution them of their danger, to preserve them in holy fear and watchfulness, whereby they are preserved from that condition which is threatened to them that neglect it."

Owen, John. The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed, Chapter 13.

"The warnings of Scripture are not inconsistent with the perseverance of the saints. They are addressed to professed believers and are designed to guard them against self-deception and carnal security."

Hodge, Charles. Systematic Theology, Vol. 3, p. 107.

"The warnings are real, but they are the means God uses to keep His elect persevering. The true believer will heed the warning, repent, and persevere in faith. Those who do not heed the warnings demonstrate they were never truly saved."

MacArthur, John. Saved Without a Doubt, p. 144.

8.5 Pastoral implications

"The possibility of apostasy is a reality that should not be ignored, and the warnings against it in the New Testament are addressed to believers who are urged to continue in the faith.

Marshall, I, Howard. Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away, p. 210.

"If you have it, you never lose it; if you lose it, you never had it. That is to say, a true Christian cannot lose his or her salvation. Those who completely and finally fall away were never truly part of Christ."

Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God, p. 191.

"If they fall, they shall be raised up again; and if they wander, they shall be brought back… Those that are truly converted never fall away so as to perish eternally."

Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise on Grace*

"The witness of the Spirit is the inward testimony to the believer that they are in Christ, but this witness is not a guarantee of final salvation unless they persevere to the end. Assurance rests upon the continuing

faithfulness of the believer."

Wesley, John. *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Sermon 21: "The Witness of the Spirit".

"The believer's assurance rests upon the objective work of Christ and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Yet, it is not an irrevocable guarantee. It is based upon the continuing faith and obedience of the believer, and the believer cannot be assured unless they endure in their relationship with God."

Picirilli. Robert, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation*

"How may we know that we are in the favour of God? By the testimony of the Spirit of God, by the witness in ourselves, by the fruits of the Spirit, by the love we have to all mankind, by our walking as Christ walked."

Wesley. John, *Sermon 10: The Witness of the Spirit*

"This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it. Yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto."

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 18, Article 3.

"I do not believe in any other assurance than that which is built on the finished work of Jesus Christ. If my confidence were to rest on anything in myself, I would be a poor, miserable wretch, indeed."

Spurgeon. C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Volume 18, Sermon 1068.

"Assurance is the testimony of the Spirit, confirming to us the free promise of God, which is the foundation of our salvation. It is not a vague or uncertain feeling, but a certainty grounded in the Word of God and the work of Christ."

Calvin. John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 2

"The believer's assurance rests upon the objective work of Christ and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. It is a certainty that comes from the work of God in the soul and from the clear promises of Scripture."

Berkhof. Louis, *Systematic Theology* (1939), Chapter 33: "The Doctrine of the Assurance of Salvation"

"Assurance is not the same as the perfection of our faith. It is a confidence in God's promises, not in our own performance. The security of the believer comes from the grace of God, not the faithfulness of the believer."

Sproul, R.C. *The Promise of Assurance* (1999).

"True assurance is not the result of a person's examination of their own heart but is the fruit of the Spirit bearing witness to the believer that they are a child of God. This assurance is inseparable from a life of holiness and perseverance."

The Works of John Owen, Volume 7, "The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed"

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Appendix C Recommended resources

The following is a small selection of resources I have found helpful, some of which are available to download in PDF format.

Let's begin with material from the **Calvinistic perspective:**

Books

Berkhof, Louis. Systematic Theology. Louisville, KY: GLH Publishing, 2017.
Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology, IVP; 2nd edition (19 Nov. 2020)
Pink, A.W. The sovereignty of God
Sproul, R.C. Chosen by God. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986
Sproul, R.C. What is reformed theology, Baker Books
Piper, John, Does God desire all to be saved, Good News Publishers
Calvin, John, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Kindle
Peterson, Robert, and Michael Williams. Why I Am Not Arminian. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004.
Daniel, Curt. The History and Theology of Calvinism. Darlington, CO: EP Books, 2019.
Also available as audio lectures. Excellent resource.
https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/histtheocalvin.html

Web resources

Monergism https://www.monergism.com/about-us
Al Martin https://www.sg-audiotreasures.org/am_calvinism.htm
Ligonier Ministries, founded by R.C. Sproul, https://www.ligonier.org/
Desiring God, founded by John Piper, https://www.desiringgod.org/

Now from the **Arminian perspective**

Books

Thiessen, Henry. C. Lectures in Systematic Theology, W.B. Eerdman Publishing, 1983 edition
Clark H Pinnock The grace of God, the will of man, Baker Publishing Group,
Walls, Jerry, and Dongell, Joseph. Why I Am Not a Calvinist. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004
Olson, Roger, Against Calvinism, Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
Olson, Roger. Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
Cottrell, Jack. What the Bible says about God the Ruler, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000.
Lennox, John. Determined to believe, Monarch Books
Pinson, Matthew. 40 Questions About Arminianism. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications , 2022.
Forlines, Leroy. Classical Arminianism. Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 2011

Web resources

Steve Gregg God's sovereignty and man's salvation 12 Videos plus pdf notes
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtzt3JhaK2U7ve60oodx1JYNVGA_Of3eN

Society of Evangelical Arminians (http://evangelicalarminians.org/).

The following resource is a very helpful guide: "The Concise Guide to the Modern Calvinist/Arminian Debate" by David J. Leonhardt. Download at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/381/

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Appendix D Aids to understanding

In my travels I have come across a range of illustrations which I think help to clarify the complexities of divine sovereignty. Here are some of them.

Hard Determinism The Puppet Show

Imagine sitting in a darkened theatre, watching a puppet show. The puppets seem so alive, moving and acting as if they have their own will. But behind the curtain, an unseen puppet master pulls the strings, dictating every action. Similarly, hard determinism sees God as the sovereign puppet master, controlling every aspect of life—even when we think we are acting independently.

Soft determinism The ocean voyage

Picture a massive liner setting out on an ocean voyage. The passengers have many freedoms on board ship—they can eat, relax, and choose their activities, but what they can't do is change the course of the ship. The owner, who's also the captain, is in control of that. Unlike any human captain, God not only steers the ship, but also controls the weather and knows where the icebergs are. He'll bring His ship into harbour where and when he wants.

The Chess Grandmaster

Visualize a chessboard with two players: one an amateur and the other a grandmaster. The grandmaster has studied every possible move and knows how to counter each one. While the amateur plays freely, the grandmaster guides the game toward an inevitable checkmate. God not only knows how to counter our every move, but actually knows in advance which moves we will choose, so there is no question as to who will be the ultimate winner. Crucially, humans are also shown, not as pawns to be moved and sacrificed at will, but as players making moves that affect the game.

Limited sovereignty The Father in the garden

Imagine a father watching his children playing in the garden, where they'll potentially fall from a swing or fight with each other. He doesn't lack power or authority to control his children. He simply chooses not to, believing he's acting in his children's best interests. Similarly, when God granted human freedom, it was not a sign of weakness but of wisdom, knowing that we learn through our choices. He is perfectly capable of dealing with human choices, even those which are contrary to what pleases him. You cannot view the Bible without seeing that God does act this way.

The Presidential Pardon

After the Vietnam war, conscientious objectors and draft resisters who fled to Canada or other countries were offered pardon upon returning to the United States. This meant they were free to return home with the legal guarantee that they would not be prosecuted. Some accepted the amnesty and returned, some did not. Those who returned simply took advantage of the amnesty declared by the U.S. government but it was of no value to those who did not wish to accept it. Similarly, Christ's redemptive work is available to all, but its benefits are only realized when it is personally received.

The death of Christ for all…. And for some **The Treasure in the Field**

In Matthew 13:44, a man finds a hidden treasure in a field. To secure the treasure, he purchases the entire field, even though his intent is solely to obtain the treasure. Likewise, Christ's death encompasses the whole world, but His special purpose is to redeem the elect—His treasure.

The Harmony of Predetermination and Free Will **The Recorded Game**

Imagine missing your favourite sports match and watching the replay later. The entire game and every play in it is fixed and unchangeable, Yet when the game happened, every player freely played his best. Therefore, the same event was both determined and free at the same time.

Someone may object that this is because the event has already occurred, but if God has infallible foreknowledge of the future, including our free acts, then everything that will happen in the future is predetermined. This does not mean these actions are not free; it simply means that God knew how we were going to use our freedom.

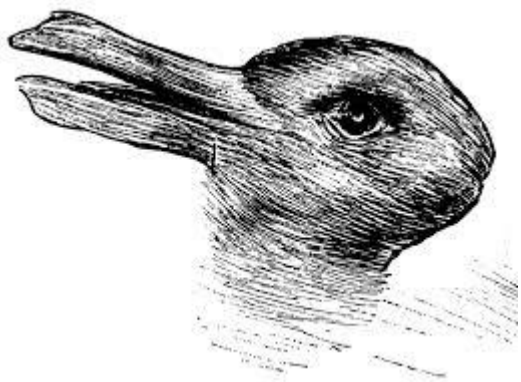
Sovereignty **The Orchestra Conductor**

Another analogy compares God to a conductor of an orchestra. In this scenario, the conductor (God) leads the orchestra (the world) in performing a symphony (history). Each musician (human being) plays their part according to their sheet music (their desires and decisions). While each musician has the freedom to interpret and play their part, the conductor ensures that all the individual parts work together to produce the intended music. The conductor's guidance brings harmony out of the diversity of notes, making the entire piece work together as planned.

The ambulance crew Faith not a work

Imagine collapsing in a shopping mall. An ambulance arrives, and the medics explain that you'll die without immediate hospital care. They ask for your consent to transport you. You agree, and their actions save your life. Later, you wouldn't boast, "I saved myself!" "I got myself to the hospital". You simply consented to their help. Faith works similarly—it is not an achievement but the humble acceptance of salvation offered by Christ.

Bliks



What do you see in this drawing? Depending on how you look at it, you either see a duck or a rabbit. Both are there to be seen and it's difficult to say why some people initially see the duck and others see the rabbit. This is an example of what philosophers call a blik.

Might there be theological bliks? People can read the same Bible passages yet see different things. Austin Fischer says "Calvinists read the Bible and what jumps out to them is God's all-determining sovereignty and commitment to glorify himself at all costs—their blik is the glory of power. Free-will theists read the Bible and what jumps out to them is the self-giving sovereignty of Jesus in which love is more important than control—their blik is the glory of love".
Fischer, Austin. Young, Restless, No Longer Reformed: Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition, p 82.

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